McMaster University | Family Medicine
David Braley Primary Care Research Collaborative

Inclusive Language Tip Sheet

Things to Keep in Mind

Inclusive language is constantly evolving; we must stay as current and knowledgeable as possible. The suggestions in this resource are meant to offer some perspective and consideration about the language we use in professional and personal settings.
Language should be used with intention. E.g., Confirm the spelling and pronunciations of any names or words you may be unsure of, and confirm people's preferred pronouns.
Language should empower and not stigmatize. Consider the preferences of the individual and the community, the functions that terms can serve for different audiences & how terminology evolves over time. E.g., the language used in academic journals can be very different from what people call themselves and want to be called. Labels can erase experiences, legitimize trauma, and serve the needs of the state rather than individuals/communities. Be aware of how labels imply blame/responsibility.

Indigenous Peoples

- Use "Indigenous Peoples" [uppercase] and avoid using "Aboriginal" or "Native."
- Avoid the common possessive construction "Canada's Indigenous Peoples." To many, it evokes a sense of paternalism and colonialism. Use "Indigenous Peoples in Canada" instead.
- Indigenous is the umbrella term
- Indigenous Peoples in Canada include First Nations, Métis and Inuit.
- If possible, try to be as specific as possible. Ask the individual or group how they identify themselves.
- Use "First Nation" or "community" instead of "reserve" unless the story is specifically about the tract of land allocated to a First Nation.
- Do not use "reservation" or "tribal affiliation," which are Americanisms

McMaster's land acknowledgement:

- McMaster University sits on the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations and within the lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon wampum agreement.
- Recently land acknowledgements have come under criticism calling them performative, superficial and problematic. Words should reflect our position within the system and be meaningful personal messages rather than copied and pasted statements.

Ability-Inclusive Language

- Use words that are factual, inclusive, and non-emotional.
- For example: “She uses a wheelchair” rather than “she is confined to a wheelchair.”
- Avoid categorizing persons with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures; avoid language such as “suffering with,” “afflicted by,” etc.
- Avoid cliches that perpetuate ableism. For example: “kick-start” or “put your best foot forward.”
- Avoid using “see”, “look”, or “hear”. Use “refer to”, “check” or “go-to” instead.
- If the disability is not relevant to the context, it is not necessary to write about it.

	Person-First: The Social Model	**Identity-First: The Minority Model**
Intent	-Places the individual before the condition. -Present disability as a neutral characteristic. -Disability cast as a social construction. -Not equating people with impairment.	-Embraces condition as a part of identity. -Portrays disability as neutral or even positive – human attribute, not a medical problem needing a cure -Disability activist counter-response to historical oppression of disabled people
Example	-Person with a disability -Person with autism -A person living with Schizophrenia	-Disabled person -Autistic
Considerations	-Prevents objectification of person or use of monolithic terms -Counteracts use of highly problematic historical terms -It is possible a well-intentioned correction may be overcorrected in some ways	-Disability represents difference, not deviance – focus on disability pride

Resource: Dunn and Andrews 2015

- Should we use person-first or identity-first language?
    - There is no simple answer; always consider how the person or community chooses to be referred – what do they prefer?
    - Where scientific and professional communication is concerned, if you are unsure of what that community or person prefers, there tends to be a reliance on person-first language, also encouraged in the McMaster Writing Guidelines.

- Dunn and Andrews 2015 recommend using identity-first language alongside person-first constructions to address the concerns of disability activists.
- Flexibility is an appropriate and respectful response.

Mental Health-Related Language

Person-first language is used by most individuals living with a mental health problem or illness and/or people with lived and living experience of substance use. Far fewer (e.g., people living with autism or deafness) use identity-first language. (Language Matters Tip Sheet, Health Canada)

Use language that combats stigma related to mental illness. For example:

Stigmatizing	Respectful
It drives me crazy.	It bothers/annoys/ frustrates me.
This is nuts.	This is interesting/strange/ peculiar/funny.
This individual suffers from depression.	They live with/are experiencing depression.
Mentally ill or insane person.	Person living with a mental health problem or illness
Committed suicide, successful suicide	Died by suicide
Failed or unsuccessful suicide attempt	Attempted suicide
Substance abuse	Substance use or substance use disorder
Everyone who is a junkie...	Everyone who uses substances...
They used to be an addict.	They are in recovery

Resource: Language matters tipsheet

Age-Related Language

- Use “older” rather than “elderly,” e.g. older adults, the older demographic, an older person.
- Give a person’s age (e.g., 8, 38, 88) rather than using imprecise and potentially derogatory terms such as youngster, middle-aged, retiree, senior citizen, or elderly.
- In general, avoid labelling people as young or old unless directly relevant to your story
- Note: Postsecondary students are not necessarily “young.”

Gender-Neutral Language

- Use academic and professional titles, but avoid using Mr., Ms, Miss, Mx, or Mrs.
- Mx is gaining traction for members of the community who wish to disrupt the gender binary.

- Is the individual's marital or family status — e.g., single, married, divorced, grandmother — relevant or important? Would this information be used if the subject were a cisgender man?
- Use gender-neutral terms to describe occupations:
    - Examples: Police officer, firefighter, flight attendant, mail carrier
- Pronouns: Where possible, reword your sentence to avoid the "he-she/him-her" gender binary:
    - NO: Staff members will have $50 added to his or her pay.
    - YES: Staff members will receive a $50 raise.
- "They/them/their" are increasingly acceptable alternatives to single pronouns. (This also recognizes there are those who do not identify as either male or female.)
- It is best practice to introduce your pronouns and then ask for clarification from the person you are interviewing, whether you perceive them as transgender or cisgender.

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

- Language about gender identity and other social identities continues to evolve. When writing about a person or group of people, remain sensitive to and respectful of their self-identification.
- A person's gender identity and/or sexual orientation should not be mentioned unless relevant to the story. (If so, use the phrase "sexual orientation," not "sexual preference.")

Members of Racialized Communities

The Ontario Human Rights Commission uses "members of racialized communities", which encompasses members of the Black community, South Asian communities, individuals who identify as bi-racial, and may include faith-based communities that are frequently racialized such as Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, etc.

- The current best practice is "racialized person" or "racialized group" instead of the more outdated and inaccurate terms of "racial minority," "visible minority," "person of colour," etc.
- Note that racial categories are socially constructed and complex; individuals and groups are entitled to self-identify.
- Terms like "BIPOC" and "POC" can group distinct identities together unnecessarily sometimes and in doing so, diminish individual experiences and cultural identities. When ethnicity is relevant to the conversation, use the most specific language.

Something to Think About: Use of the Term 'Vulnerable'

- Terms like 'vulnerable groups' are often vaguely defined or left undefined, leaving readers to fill in the blanks on who's vulnerable or what makes them vulnerable.
    - Readers may turn to false and damaging narratives.
    - Vagueness can serve the political function of obscuring power relationships and limiting the discussion of transformational change.

- Vulnerability has many dimensions. It is dynamic and universal. It is a state, NOT a trait. Everyone experiences vulnerability to different degrees at different times, and it can be a source of strength. When groups are depicted as inherently vulnerable, you may risk implying that the population is vulnerable outside of other realities such as colonization, racism, misogyny, and economic exploitation.
    - We're not saying don't use the term 'vulnerable' altogether; make sure you clearly identify the sources of vulnerability when you mention it.
- This is also applied to similar terms such as 'marginalized,' 'disadvantaged,' or 'at risk.'
    - Our work language communicate that the onus for vulnerability falls on the system, not the group. Health inequities are socially constructed, yet the implication that populations are inherently vulnerable persists in public health.
    - Labels can sanitize experiences, legitimize trauma, and serve the needs of the state rather than individuals/communities. Thinking about collective vs individuals has different implications. Be aware of how labels imply blame/responsibility

People with Lived Experiences

Lived expertise is an essential part of innovation, and we must realize that while people might not always have letters behind their names, they have potential and capability. We need to reflect on why we are seeking them and the potential of this engagement. It needs to be intentional and not just to fill a need.

- Using terms like stakeholder can be considered offensive and rooted in colonialism by some communities. Instead, it's important to use the correct language that is preferred by the individuals or communities
    - Use collaborator and partner instead.

Resources

- McMaster Writing and Storytelling Guidelines – Inclusive Language
- Words Matter: McMaster University's Editorial Style Guide- Notes on Inclusive Language.https://accessibility.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2021/04/writing-guidlines.pdf
- Dunn, D. S.; Andrews, E. E. Person-First and Identity-First Language: Developing Psychologists' Cultural Competence Using Disability Language. *American Psychologist* 2015, *70* (3), 255–264. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038636.
- Katz, A. S.; Hardy, B. J.; Firestone, M.; Lofters, A.; Morton-Ninomiya, M. E. Vagueness, Power and Public Health: Use of 'vulnerable' in Public Health Literature. *Critical Public Health* 2020, *30* (5), 601–611. https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2019.1656800.
- https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/disability/arc/words-images.html
- https://riic.ca/the-guide/on-the-air/lexicon-and-terminology/
- What's wrong with land acknowledgments, and how to make them better | CBC News
- Webinar: Words Matter: Reflections on Language about Equity, Vulnerability, and Lived Experience. Equity-based co-production discussions. McMaster Co-design Hub