

# Inclusive language guide

Adding inclusion practices to your production can be as simple as what you choose to say. While we might not intend to cause harm or to discriminate with our words, we sometimes choose phrases that can affect people in bad ways. Using inclusive language helps to *break social norms*<sup>1</sup> that quietly keep up stereotypes about people based on their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and more.

Inclusive language is about finding ways to *signal your intention* to welcome people of diverse identities and those who feel excluded by commonly used terms. It is an evolving practice as we work together to understand the roots of common words and phrases and learn how those terms uphold systems of oppression.

Language is always changing, and using inclusive language is another way of *finding more effective options* to get your meaning across.

There are a few principles to keep in mind when thinking about inclusive language:

**Challenge idioms and phrases.** A lot of the ways we describe situations, relationships, and people can be figurative, expressing more meaning through imagery than its actual meaning. Some of these phrases can be harmless, such as “under the weather” to mean feeling unwell, while others are rooted in stereotypes, such as “circle the wagons” to refer to a need to regroup, reinforcing the idea that Indigenous people are a threat to defend against. Consider that it is disrespectful to the ancient practices and knowledge of diverse cultures to refer to your colleagues as your “tribe,” to something as your “spirit animal,” and to your mentor as your “guru.” Because these phrases are so common, it’s important to take a beat to think about where those phrases come from and what power structures they might reinforce.

Instead of	Use
“First-world problem”	“Not a huge concern” or “Trivial problem”
“Pow wow”	“Meeting” or “Gathering”
“Blind spot”	“Gap in understanding” or “Hidden bias”
“Spooky season”	“Halloween” or “Autumn”
“Lame”	“Uncool” or “Silly”

<sup>1</sup> <https://psychology.tips/breaking-social-norms/>

**Avoid using gendered language.** Using gendered language is common and, more often than not, unnecessary. We often refer to groups of people as “ladies and gentlemen,” or to a group of kids as “boys and girls,” but naming the assumed genders of people in a group, especially when we are speaking to or about the group as a whole, adds nothing to the conversation. Also, think about the use of the word “man” to describe all people, especially in the working world. “Manpower,” “man hours” and “2-man team” all carry an assumption that they refer to men, even when we know differently.

You may also want to consider how you refer to someone’s relationship status. Avoid defaulting to husband/wife or son/daughter, unless you know that is how the individual refers to that relation. Try “spouse,” “partner,” or “significant other” for romantic relationships and “child,” “parent,” or “sibling” for family relationships to start. You can also normalize using they/them pronouns for someone until they confirm their correct pronouns with you. This removes the assumption that you know how that person expresses their gender.

Here are some more examples:

Instead of	Use
“Hi, guys”	“Hi, folks!” or “Hi!”
“Ladies and gentlemen”	“Everyone,” “colleagues,” “folks” or “team”
“Manpower” or “man hours”	“Workers,” “workforce,” “employees,” or “staff” “Work hours”
“Manning a desk”	“Staffing a desk”

**Put the person first.** Referring to someone by their experience, their ability, or their characteristics might seem innocent. Simply switching the order by putting the person ahead of the descriptor defines them by their humanity instead of a category. Think “person experiencing domestic violence” instead of “victim,” or “person with blonde hair” instead of “blonde.” By putting the person first, you can avoid stereotypes and assumptions associated with labels and see people for more than a single characteristic.

Be certain to confirm each person’s preferences as well. Some folks prefer to centre an aspect of their identity instead of using person-first language. Respect their preference.

When in doubt, put the person at the centre:

Instead of	Use
“Disabled person” or “special needs person”	“Person with a disability” or “person living with a disability”
“Wheelchair-bound person”	“Person who uses a wheelchair” or “person who uses a mobility aid”
“Alcoholic,” “addict,” or “drug abuser”	“Person with a substance-use disorder” or “person experiencing a substance-use dependence”

**Use the terms that are preferred by the communities you reference.** Figure out the terms that people call themselves and use those. These terms evolve over time and it is up to you to stay current on appropriate language. This includes language used to discuss elements of those identities, such as pronoun use. Whenever possible, be specific and use the language preferred by the individual you are speaking to or about. For example, you might know a person with black skin who prefers being referred to as African Canadian and another person who prefers being referred to as Black.

A clear exception here is when communities have taken back terms that have been used to cause them harm in the past. Note that while the term “queer” has been reclaimed by many folks who identify as 2SLGBTQ+, this term has historically been used as a slur and may cause harm to some.

Instead of	Use
“Indian,” “Aboriginal,” or “Native”	“Indigenous” or the correct and specific term for their identity if they confirm it to you. In some cases, “Indian” is the correct legal term, such as talking about the federal Indian Act
“Minority”	“Person of the global majority,” or “person of colour”
“Homosexual”	“2SLGBTQ+” or the specific identity if they have confirmed that with you
“Sexual preference”	“Sexuality,” “sexual identity,” or “sexual orientation”
“Born a man” or “born a woman”	“Assigned male at birth” or “assigned female at birth”
“Transvestite,” transsexual, or “transgendered”	Person who is “trans,” “transgender,” “gender non-conforming,” or “non-binary”
“Preferred pronouns” or “new pronouns”	“Correct pronouns” or “pronouns”

**Be consistent.** Use inclusive language in every group. This helps your brain get used to using inclusive phrases, confirms your commitment to inclusion with others, and respects the invisible diversity in the room.

Language is personal and can feel emotionally charged. Some people resist changes to their existing understanding of grammar, the meaning of words, or their habits, often saying that “people should understand what they actually mean”. This puts the pressure on the people who feel on the outside and is a common form of microaggression<sup>2</sup>. Think about it like a project: should your audience be able to understand what you meant in the film simply because that’s what you imagined, or is it your job as a filmmaker to make your story clear to the viewer?

Like any creative project, language is more about the person on the receiving end than the creator. So, if you mean to be welcoming, consider the points of view and experiences of the people on the receiving end.

Changing habits takes time. Keep reflecting on how your words might be informed by colonial, racist, sexist, or other exclusionary systems and beliefs. Then, keep working to replace that language with new, more inclusive words.

## Resources

[Archie Crowley](#)

[Canadian Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce](#)

[Queen's University, Faculty of Health Sciences](#)

[Western University Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872371063/microaggressions-are-a-big-deal-how-to-talk-them-out-and-when-to-walk-away>