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Non-gendered language examples

Much of our everyday language has an implicit bias toward two genders (male and female) and one sexuality (heterosexual), dismissing or outright erasing employees who identify as non-binary or part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language acknowledges diversity by removing assumptions of a male-as-norm language and instead using a gender-neutral default — "they" instead of "he" —inclusive to employees of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Alternatives to the male default exclusionary phrases

Problematic Term	Inclusive Term	Guidelines
Chairman	Chairperson or chair	Use non-gendered language when referring to a person's position, professional title, or occupation to avoid implicit bias that one sex is the default for those roles.
Man hours; Manpower	Work hours or hours; Workforce	Positioning men as the status quo excludes women and non-binary people.

Avoid heteronormative language and gendered assumptions.

Problematic	Alternative Phrases	Guidelines
Hi guys; Hello ladies and gentlemen	Hi everyone, folks, or team	The generic or default "man" in place of "everyone" implies a hierarchy and inequity among the spectrum of gender and sexual identities. Addressing only men and women is also exclusionary and enforces a gender binary.
Husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend; Mother or father	Partner or significant other; Parent, caregiver, or guardian	Avoid gendered assumptions about employees' family make-up and sexual orientation.

Another simple step to avoid reinforcing the exclusionary gender binary is normalizing sharing pronouns. In hybrid workforces, adding pronouns to email signatures, Zoom displays, or Slack profiles creates a non-intrusive method for sharing gender identity.

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Replacements for stereotypes and culturally appropriative phrases

Idioms, or phrases that mean something different than the actual words being used can be common in an office but bring with them complex or outright negative historical context. For one, "divide and conquer" may seem harmless shorthand for tackling a project strategically, but the phrase carries connotations of oppression and colonialism.

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Many of these common phrases can be harmful, inappropriate, & inconsiderate.

Term	Alternative	Historical Context
Gyp or gypped	Duped or tricked	Gyp/gypped is a racist term that describes being cheated or defrauded. It stems from the word 'gypsy,' which was originally applied to the Romani people.
Guru	Expert or authority	Used in Buddhist and Hindu religions to refer to a spiritual guide or leader, a Guru is a title of high esteem. To use it as shorthand for your experience with social media trivializes the importance of the title and its origins.

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Tribe	Group, crew, community, or circle	"Tribe" becoming popularized is a result of colonialism and associates it with primitiveness or savagery offensive to African peoples. For Native American (First Nations) peoples, the term "tribe" is a bureaucratic word assigned by the U.S. government.
Spirit animal	Patronus or kindred spirit	The way "spirit animal" has been popularized to mean a favorite or relatable animal, which makes light of Indigenous cultures' relationships with nature. It also reinforces a stereotype that homogenizes a diverse group of peoples and customs.
Stakeholder	Contributor, implementing partner, interested parties, and working partner	The term stakeholder can refer to people in power, the "holders" (Bentley, 2022). Stakeholders have its roots in colonialism. Settlers drove wooden stakes in the ground to "stake their claim" on land that belonged to Indigenous people, which is the opposite of empowerment and inclusivity.
Blacklist and whitelist	Blocklist or denylist and allowlist	These terms equate "black" with "bad" and "white" with "good," which is a problematic and racist association.
Peanut gallery	Hecklers or jokesters	Peanut gallery is a phrase from the late 19th century that referred to the cheapest seats, or the section for Black people in segregated theaters.

Consider also that idioms – even acronyms – may create communication barriers for global companies or employees from across nationalities, religions, languages, and ethnicities.

Speaking plainly, especially in large and diverse groups, is always a good rule of thumb.

Support racial identity and equality.

Identity is essential to our identity, so misidentifying someone's race or ethnicity can be highly invalidating.

Rather than generalize many distinct people into one racial group, like Asian or Hispanic, familiarize yourself with race, ethnicity, and national origin identities. And when in doubt, asking the person respectfully in the appropriate setting is an excellent way to go.

Problematic	Preferred Alternative	Guidelines
Hispanic (when used to refer to all Spanish speaking nationalities)	Hispanic – descendants of all Spanish-speaking countries; Latino/Latina/Latinx – people of Latin American heritage	When it's relevant to mention the race or ethnicity of a person or group of people, be specific. There are many terms for different ethnicities and nationalities, and people can have multiple racial and ethnic identities. It is best to ask what a person identifies with.

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Minority or minority group	Marginalized groups, underrepresented groups, people of color (POC), Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC); UK terms: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) or Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)	When referring to a diverse group of people, if you cannot be specific, Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) is the preferred broad term. "Underrepresented" is also acceptable to describe a group in context. For example, "Latino workers are underrepresented in tech."

Ableist language examples and person-first alternatives

Ableist language is any language derogatory toward people with disabilities, suggests that disability is abnormal, or perpetuates stereotypes of weakness.

This language bias can also implicitly define a person by their disability status. There are two approaches to combating this aspect of ableist language:

Preferences on which language is correct to use vary by person and group, and in general, it's best not to assume a default and to address the individual based on their preferences.

Problematic	Preferred Alternative	Guidelines
The disabled or handicapped person	People with disabilities or persons with a disability	Put the person before the disability and avoid terms that imply the person is less than or weak. "The disabled" removes humanity from a group of people by referring to them solely by generalized disability status. Note that "disabled person" may be an acceptable term for individuals embracing identity-first language. When in doubt, ask!
Wheelchair bound	Wheelchair user or person who uses a wheelchair	Avoid language that frames any form of mobility equipment or assistive support as a limitation to the user.

Again, these are general language guidelines and examples to help you identify exclusionary language and provide guidance when unsure of an individual's preferred identifier or the specifics of a group's identity.

Asking a person respectfully about their identity is the best way to get accurate information. That said, always stop and think about why you must first ask.

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If you're asking for someone's pronouns to be respectful, find a private place to ask, "What are your pronouns?" or normalize introducing yourself with your pronouns and asking others for theirs.

Any other questions about identity should only come after forming a relationship with someone or after they volunteer information.

And remember, no one should feel put-upon or uncomfortable when asked about their identity. A person may not feel psychologically safe enough in their environment to engage in discussions of identity.

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REFERENCE

Inc., L. V. (2021). *Inclusive Language: A Writing Guide on Respecting Diversity.* United States: Incorporated Lingo Valley.