

Tips to Building Respectful Communications



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a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Introduction

Using language and practices that are inclusive and respectful are key to building a more inclusive living and learning environments in which all can thrive. The purpose of this resource is to help us start thinking about the impact that certain words and actions may have on our communities and to offer suggestions for more inclusive ways of expressing ideas and engaging with different groups.

Why is respectful language so important? Language shapes our perceptions and attitudes towards all communities around us. Stereotypes can lead to discrimination as they take away a person’s individuality and oversimplify qualities that often lack accuracy. Some words by their very nature degrade and diminish people. There are many examples of commonly used language and phrases that refer to people from different groups in ways that are condemnatory, judgmental, or framed in medical jargon. These inappropriate terms continue to evoke feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt, and discomfort. The use of disrespectful or insensitive language, even if unintentional, aids in perpetuating negative attitudes about groups, continuing a cycle of oppression. This resource encourages language that conveys sensitivity and understanding not for the sake of being ‘correct’, but in recognition that the way we use words has a real impact on others around us.

Adapted from: “Guidelines for Inclusive Language.” Durham District School Board, Ontario, Canada, 2009.

Section I: General Guidelines

Three suggested principles

1. Avoid mentioning personal characteristics unless relevant.

As a general rule, personal characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability, should only be referred to when they are relevant to the communication. Otherwise avoid mentioning them.

2. Use inclusive language and person first construction.

If it is relevant in a communication to refer to an individual's personal characteristics, these two principles may be useful to follow.

Inclusive Language is language that does not stereotype or demean people based on personal characteristics including gender, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Instead it emphasizes or focuses the attention on similarities, equality and respect. Avoid using language that detracts from the sense of value of the whole person and terms that exclude, marginalize, diminish or lower the status of any individual or group. In addition, avoid stereotypes and words that are derived from negative assumptions (for example avoid saying 'that's lame' for 'that's unfortunate').

Person-First Construction places people ahead of personal characteristics. It emphasizes or focuses attention on an individual's personhood, rather than on cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or national status or the existence of a disability, illness or condition (for example use 'a person with a disability' instead of 'a disabled person').

3. Use terms preferred by the group or individual

When references are valid, learn the most appropriate specific terminology or use the term preferred by the person or group concerned. Above all, it is important to respect the right of individuals and groups to refer to themselves as they choose.

Adapted from: "Practice Resource: Guidelines for respectful language". The Law Society of British Columbia, 2007.

Facilitating an inclusive environment

Below are some suggested general practices to consider in your classroom, office, or work space.

Be mindful of when and how you choose to share student information.

Before printing out or emailing student information, think about what details you are sharing and if they are necessary. Actions such as passing around or publicly posting a class roll that contains the full legal names and legal gender markers of all students may significantly compromise some students' privacy and safety. For example this might 'out' a transgender student whose legal records do not match their current gender identity or expression.

If a student shares a preferred name, be sure to always use it. For some students, a preferred name listed in their student records may only be a nickname, but for others it may be a significant part of their identity. If writing a recommendation or referral for a student who goes by a preferred name, check in with them first about what name is best to use. It is generally not appropriate to ask why a student has chosen to use a preferred name.

Address assumptions and generalizations if they arise in discussions.

Question the validity of stereotypes and overgeneralizations about a group, community, or culture. Never expect one person to speak up as an 'expert' for an entire identity category.

Do not tolerate discriminatory remarks or humor in public spaces.

Consider and prepare strategies in advance to best confront and speak out against inappropriate remarks or jokes in your classroom, lab, office, or organization.

Ask questions about personal information respectfully. Always recognize a person's right to not share information about their identity. Curiosity does not warrant the right to be invasive. Some questions are best not asked.

Model appropriate compliments. Even if well intended, compliments that rely on embedded stereotypes or that draw unnecessary attention to a person's personal characteristics can be hurtful. Phrasing such as 'you're too pretty to be an engineer' or 'but you speak English so well' implies stereotyped assumptions or lower expectations for individuals of certain backgrounds. Instead give compliments that are professional and specific to the task or work accomplished.

Introduce 'trigger warnings' when necessary. Recognize that discussions or depictions of certain topics such as violence, sexual assault, or hurtful language may 'trigger' or remind a student of personal trauma. In an effort to be respectful of this, give a 'trigger warning' before discussing or sharing this type of content. For example, say 'the video we are about to watch contains a scene with a violent car crash. If you need to, you may step out of the room until the video is over'.

Acknowledge your own biases and emotions. We all have things to 'unlearn' in regards to stereotypes and myths about different groups. Take time in the classroom to discuss the fact that we all come from different social locations and viewpoints and that we all bring emotions into a learning environment. Make space for a diverse range of voices and experiences.

Be an active ally. Seek out trainings, workshops and events on campus to enrich your own understanding of diversity issues. Learn about campus and community resources for a broad range of groups and be prepared to share them with students.

Section II: Specific Contexts

This section includes general language guidelines to use when speaking or referring to different groups, along with suggestions for inclusive practices in interactions. Language is constantly evolving and sometimes there is no agreement even among specific groups as to what could be considered offensive versus appropriate. Please consider the language suggestions in this guide as a starting point, rather than a concrete or exhaustive list.

People of diverse races, ethnicities, or countries of origin

Overview of relevant language

Anti-racism - The practice of identifying, challenging, preventing, eliminating, and changing the values, structures, policies, programs, practices, and behaviours that perpetuate racism.

Ethnicity - A social and political construct used by individuals and communities to define themselves and others. Specifically, ethnicity refers to a person's cultural background, including language, origin, faith, and heritage. Ethnicity comprises the ideas, beliefs, values, and behaviours that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Ethnicity tends to be perceived in terms of common culture, history, language, or nationality.

Privilege (and racial privilege) - Privilege encompasses the many unearned advantages of higher status, such as personal contacts with employers, good childhood health care, inherited money, and speaking the same dialect and accent as people with institutional power. Racial privilege is the access to resources, social rewards, and the power to shape the norms and values of society, which white people receive, by virtue of their skin colour, in a racist society.

Race - Race represents the notion that there are biologically discrete races of human beings that can be ordered in terms of superiority of intelligence, sexuality, or morality. Today, the concept of race is a controversial one, as it is perceived to refer to the genetic, physical characteristics that allegedly are common to certain groups. However, modern science has determined that no such biological distinctions exist among humans and that the term serves no useful scientific purpose. The term 'race' is now understood as a social construct in which a group sees itself.

Also note that the term is controversial among those who assert that there is only one race, the human race, and that traditional notions of racial differences are artificial and arbitrary constructs. Proponents of this view prefer the use of the term 'racialized groups' to describe people that would be traditionally referred to as visible minorities. This term reinforces the idea that race, or more properly 'racialization', is something imposed on a person by outside perception.

Racial discrimination - As one of the many signatories to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism, in 1969, Canada agreed to the following definition of racial discrimination found in Article 1:

"Racial discrimination shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, social, cultural, or any other field of public life."

Racism - A set of mistaken assumptions, opinions, and actions resulting from the belief that one group of people categorized by colour or ancestry is inherently superior to another. Racism may be present in organizational and institutional policies, programs, and practices, as well as in the attitudes and behaviour of individuals.

Reverse racism - This term was created to imply that dominant groups could be the victims of racism. Racism includes having a certain power in society, power which non-dominant groups do not have. It is a term used consciously or unconsciously to blame and place non-dominant groups back in a targeted position. When dominant groups are discriminated against it is simply 'discrimination'.

Systemic racism - This type of racism is impersonal, unconscious, unintentional, and hidden. The basis of systemic racism is the consequences (not the intent) of seemingly neutral rules, policies, or procedures.

Visible minority – This phrase refers to groups who share physically visible characteristics such as skin colour. It refers to a certain time and place, when it was true in Canada that people of colour were a minority compared to the majority of the population. The term 'visible minority', although remaining in some legislation, is quickly losing its relevance, as it is no longer applicable in our society due to changing demographics. Currently, the phrase should be used with caution because it often excludes groups who commonly experience discrimination. It does not seem to include, for example, many Latin Americans, southern Europeans, and religious groups, such as Jews and Muslims.

'Visible minorities' is a term used in federal legislation to describe persons who are not of the majority race in a given population. Visible minorities are defined under the Employment Equity Act as "persons, other than Aboriginals, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." The term 'visible minorities' is also used as a demographic category by Statistics Canada. In March 2007, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racism denounced the term 'visible minorities' and Canada's use of it as racist. A spokesperson for the Committee explained, "the use of the term seemed to somehow indicate that 'whiteness' was the standard, all others differing from that being visible." However, the Committee did not suggest an alternative term.

Source: "Strategic Framework for Action: a strategy to stimulate joint action on multiculturalism and the elimination of racism in British Columbia". British Columbia Multicultural Advisory Council, 2005.

Suggestions for communications

Avoid referring to a person’s race, ethnicity or country of origin unless it is relevant to the communication. When references are valid, learn the most appropriate specific terminology or use the term preferred by the person or group concerned. For example, introducing a guest speaker ‘from Kuwait’, rather than ‘from the Middle East’.

Capitalize the proper names of nationalities, peoples, and race. For example: Aboriginal Peoples, Arab, French-Canadian, Inuit, Asian, Cree, etc. ‘Black’ and ‘white’ do not name races. If used to describe colour, they are lowercase.

Learn about the history of terms used to refer to race. Be mindful that terms have a precise meaning and are often not interchangeable. For example, do not substitute ‘colored’ or ‘colored people’ for ‘people of colour’, as this phrasing is embedded in a history of racial inequality and segregation.

Avoid generalizations based in race or ethnicity. Do not assume that a person's appearance defines their nationality, cultural background or religious beliefs.

Do not assume that all people belonging to particular communities act or think the same way. Avoid making broad generalizations involving entire communities, such as saying that a particular ethnic group is inclined to be socially conservative.

Avoid using stereotypes and archaic expressions that may be demeaning or offensive. For example, avoid phrases such as ‘gyped’ to mean ‘swindled’.

Adapted from: “Practice Resource: Guidelines for respectful language”. The Law Society of British Columbia, 2007.

Aboriginal Peoples

Overview of relevant language

Terminology can be critical for Indigenous populations, as the term for a group may not have been selected by the population themselves but instead imposed on them by colonizers. A term can represent certain colonial histories and power dynamics. On the other hand, terms can empower populations when the people have the power to self-identify. The most respectful approach is often to use the most specific term for a population when possible.

Aboriginal - The term 'Aboriginal' refers to the first inhabitants of Canada, and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This term came into popular usage in Canadian contexts after 1982, when Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution defined the term as such.

Colonialism - Colonialism is a practice of domination, subjugating one people over another. It is the permanent transfer of a population that maintains an allegiance to their country, to a new land.

First Nations - First Nation is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s and 80s and generally replaced the term Indian, although unlike Indian, the term First Nation does not have a legal definition. While First Nations refers to the ethnicity of First Nations peoples, the singular First Nation can refer to a band, a reserve-based community, or a larger tribal grouping and the status Indians who live in them.

Inuit - This term refers to specific groups of people generally living in the far north who are not considered 'Indians' under Canadian law.

Métis - The term Métis refers to a collective of cultures and ethnic identities that resulted from unions between Aboriginal and European people in what is now Canada. This term has general and specific uses, and the differences between them are often contentious. It is sometimes used as a general term to refer to

people of mixed ancestry, whereas in a legal context, 'Métis' refers to descendants of specific historic communities.

Indian - The term 'Indian' refers to the legal identity of a First Nations person who is registered under the Indian Act. The term 'Indian' should be used only when referring to a First Nations person with status under the Indian Act, and only within its legal context. Aside from this specific legal context, the term 'Indian' in Canada is considered outdated and may be considered offensive. 'Indian Band' is also a legal term under the Indian Act to denote a grouping of status Indians.

Indigenous - Indigenous is a term used to encompass a variety of Aboriginal groups. It is most frequently used in an international, transnational, or global context. This term came into wide usage during the 1970s when Aboriginal groups organized transnationally and pushed for greater presence in the United Nations (UN).

Native – 'Native' is a general term that refers to a person or thing that has originated from a particular place. The term 'native' does not denote a specific Aboriginal ethnicity (such as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit). In Canada, the term 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' is generally preferred to 'Native'. Some may feel that 'native' has a negative connotation and is outdated. This term can also be problematic in certain contexts, as some non-Aboriginal peoples born in a settler state may argue that they, too, are 'native'.

While 'native' is generally not considered offensive, it may still hold negative connotations for some. Because it is a very general, overarching term, it does not account for any distinctiveness between various Aboriginal groups. If you are referencing a specific group, it is generally considered more respectful to use another term that more specifically denotes which peoples you are referring to.

Peoples - The plural peoples recognizes that more than one distinct group comprises the Aboriginal population of Canada. For example, Aboriginal people (singular) might mean each Aboriginal individual, whereas Aboriginal peoples (plural) indicates a number of separate Aboriginal populations.

Adapted from: "Terminology." First Nations Studies Program, UBC, 2009.

People with disabilities

Overview of relevant language

Remember that words have a precise meaning and are often not interchangeable. Below is some suggested appropriate terminology to use when speaking or referring to people with disabilities.

Instead of...	Please use...
Birth defect, congenital defect, deformity	Person born with a disability, person who has a congenital disability
Blind (the), visually impaired (the)	Person who is blind, person with a visual impairment
Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	Person who uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user
Cripple, crippled, lame	Person with a disability, person with a mobility impairment, person who has a spinal cord injury, arthritis, etc.
Hard of hearing (the), hearing impaired	Person who is hard of hearing Note: These individuals are not deaf and may compensate for a hearing loss with an amplification device or system.
Epileptic (the)	Person who has epilepsy
Fit, attack, spell	Seizure

Instead of...	Please use...
Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb	Person who is deaf Note: Culturally-linguistically deaf people (that is, sign language users) are properly identified as "the Deaf" (upper-case "D"). People who do not use sign language are properly referred to as "the deaf" (lower-case "d") or "persons who are deaf."
Handicapped (the), invalid	Person with a disability
Handicapped parking, bathrooms	Accessible parking, accessible bathrooms
Inarticulate, incoherent	Person who has a speech disorder, person who has a speech disability
Insane (unsound mind), lunatic, maniac, mental patient, mentally diseased, mentally ill, neurotic, psychotic	Person with a mental health disability
Learning disabled, learning disordered, dyslexic (the)	Person with a learning disability
Mentally retarded, defective, feeble minded, idiot, imbecile, moron, retarded, simple	Person with an intellectual disability

Instead of...	Please use...
Normal	Person without a disability
Person who has trouble...	Person who needs...
Physically challenged, physically handicapped, physically impaired	Person with a disability
Suffers from, stricken with, afflicted by	Person with a disability Note: People with disabilities do not necessarily suffer.
Victim of cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc.	Person who has cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc. Person with a mobility impairment, person with a disability

Source: "A Way with Words and Images: suggestions for the portrayal of people with disabilities". Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Government of Canada, 2006.

Suggestions for communications

The word 'disabled' is an adjective, not a noun. A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. People are not conditions. Instead of saying 'the disabled', use the term 'people with disabilities'.

Focus on the person rather than the disability. If the disability isn't relevant to the context of a conversation or interaction, it's not necessary to mention it. Most often it will not be relevant to mention.

Avoid words such as: burden, incompetent, or defective. These suggest that people with disabilities are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to people without disabilities.

Avoid categorizing people with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgmental, non-emotional, and are accurate descriptions. Avoid using "brave," "courageous," "inspirational," or other similar words to describe a person with a disability. Remember that the majority of people with disabilities have similar ambitions as the rest of the population and that words and images should reflect their inclusion in society.

Be careful not use words like: retarded, spaz, crazy, or lame as insults in daily conversation. Words such as these are embedded in a history of discrimination against people with disabilities. Find a different word to use to express your feelings – for example try out: silly, rude, illogical, boring, bad, annoying, awful, ridiculous, or terrible.

People with disabilities are comfortable with the language used to describe daily living activities. People who use wheelchairs go for 'walks', people with visual impairments 'see' what you mean, and so on. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner, but that doesn't mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.

Avoid references to disability that cause discomfort, guilt, pity, or insult. Words like 'suffers from', 'stricken with', 'afflicted by', 'patient', 'disease', or 'sick' suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.

Remember that, although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as mental health conditions (including depression, anxiety disorders, bi-polar disorder), neurological disabilities (including learning disabilities, ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder) and chronic health conditions (including chronic pain, chronic fatigue, gastro-intestinal issues) also encounter barriers and negative attitudes. Don't assume that you can tell who has/doesn't have a disability or what type of disability a person might have.

It's appropriate to shake hands when introduced to a person with a disability. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb do shake hands.

When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to them. Do this instead of speaking through a companion, interpreter, or intervener who may be there.

Relax. Be yourself. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later" or "Got to be running along" that seem to relate to the person's disability.

Offer assistance if you feel like it, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help. Listen to any instructions the person may want to give. Never touch someone without their permission.

Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking and talking.

Avoid putting a person with a disability on a pedestal. Don't use patronizing terms or talk down to them. Interact with a person with a disability as you would any other person.

Adapted from: "A Way with Words and Images: suggestions for the portrayal of people with disabilities". Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Government of Canada, 2006.

Understanding barriers

Barriers are obstacles – things that can stand in the way of people with disabilities doing many of the day-to-day activities that most of us take for granted. Barriers can make activities like shopping, working, going to a movie or attending an event difficult, sometimes impossible, for people with disabilities. These can include:

Architectural and Physical Barriers

Features of public buildings or spaces that cause problems for people with disabilities. Examples are:

- hallways and doorways that are too narrow for a person using a wheelchair, electric scooter or walker
- counters that are too high for a person of short stature
- poor lighting for people with low vision
- doorknobs that are difficult for people with arthritis to grasp

Information or Communications Barriers

When information is presented in a way that's not accessible. Examples are:

- print is too small to read
- a video shared doesn't have subtitles
- a website that doesn't support screen-reading software
- signs that are not clear or easily understood

Attitudinal Barriers

Social attitudes or beliefs that discriminate against people with disabilities.

Examples are:

- thinking that people with disabilities are inferior
- assuming a person's disability negatively affects other senses, abilities or personality traits, or that the total person is impaired
- questioning whether disabilities that are not visible are 'real' or 'valid', such as learning disabilities
- thinking it's ok to ask people with disabilities personal or invasive questions about their health, bodies, medical history, or capabilities

Systemic Barriers

When an organization's policies or practices discriminate against people with disabilities. For example:

- a hiring process that is not open to people with disabilities

Adapted from: "Tips on Serving Customers with Disabilities." Accessible Ontario Customer Service. OESC, 2008.

Gender and sexuality

Overview of relevant language

Acknowledge the difference between sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Sexual Orientation: The emotional, romantic and sexual attraction to another person(s). It can be fluid and change over time.

Gender/Gender Identity: This is how we perceive our identity as male, female, or another gender, regardless of our physical bodies.

Sex: A label we are given (typically at birth) to describe our physical bodies and reproductive capacity. Characteristics used to determine sex may include genitals, gonads, hormones, chromosomes and secondary sex characteristics.

LGBT – An acronym that stands for ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender’ that is sometimes used as an umbrella term for this community.

Queer - An umbrella term used proudly by some people to defy gender or sexual restrictions. This is also one way some people identify themselves as members of the lesbian, gay, bi, and/or trans communities or cultures. If you do use this term, use it to refer to ‘queer communities’ rather than calling an individual ‘queer’, unless they have already told you that’s how they identify.

Out - When a person lives openly as LGBT. You may also see ‘out’ used as a verb to describe when information about a person’s gender or sexuality is publicly shared without their consent, such as ‘the newspaper outed her as a lesbian’.

Heterosexual - A person who has romantic or sexual attractions to people of another sex or gender.

Homosexual – Outdated clinical term used to describe a person who has romantic and/or sexual attractions to people of the same sex or gender. This term is now considered insulting and should not be used. Avoid other offensive terms such as ‘alternative lifestyle’ and ‘sexual preference’.

Gay - A person who has romantic and/or sexual attractions primarily to people of the same gender or sex. Avoid using ‘gay’ as an umbrella term, such as referring to ‘gay people’.

Lesbian - A female identified person who has romantic or sexual attractions primarily to people of the same gender or sex.

Bisexual - A person who may have romantic or sexual attractions to people of more than one gender or sex.

Asexual - A person who has no sexual attractions to others.

Pansexual - A person who has romantic or sexual attractions to people of any gender or sex.

Questioning - A person who isn't certain if they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans and is still trying to figure out how they identify themselves.

Intersex - An umbrella term used to describe a person whose physical sex characteristics don't fit traditional definitions of male or female. Avoid the former clinical term 'hermaphrodite', as it is seen as inaccurate and offensive.

Trans - An umbrella term for a person whose gender identity does not match society's expectations of the gender they were assigned at birth. Note that trans is an adjective, not a noun. For example, say 'a trans person', not 'a transgender' or 'transgendered'. Avoid phrases that oversimplify or imply a person's gender is false, such as 'used to be a man/woman', 'trapped in the wrong body', or the act of putting a trans person's preferred name or gender pronouns in quote marks. Never share a person's trans status without their permission.

Transsexual - An older term which originated in the medical and psychological communities. While some trans people still prefer to use the term transsexual to describe themselves, many prefer the term transgender or trans. Transsexual is not an umbrella term; many transgender people do not identify as transsexual.

Transition - The process trans people go through to overcome physical, legal and social barriers so they can express their self-identified gender. Avoid reference to 'sex change' or 'sex change operation'. Avoid overemphasizing surgery when discussing trans people or transition. In almost all situations, it is inappropriate to inquire about a trans person's body, genitals or medical history.

Two-spirited - A person who has both a masculine and a feminine spirit. This term is used by some Aboriginal people in Canada to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.

Cisgender/Cissexual - A person who is not trans: whose gender identity, behaviours and appearance are in harmony with what their culture expects from a person with their assigned sex.

Crossdresser - Someone who occasionally dresses in the clothing of the 'opposite' gender as part of their gender expression. Avoid the use of the term 'transvestite', as it is now considered offensive.

Drag King/Drag Queen - Someone who dresses up as the 'opposite' gender for performance or fun.

Genderqueer/Gender fluid/Gender variant - Identity term(s) used by some people whose gender expression or gender identities defy gender restrictions and/or to deconstruct binary gender norms.

Adapted from: "Glossary". Rainbow Health Ontario, 2013.

Suggestions for communications

Use language and practices that promote gender equality and that are inclusive and respectful of diverse gender identities and sexualities. Below are some general suggestions and examples.

Use gender neutral terms and phrasing.

Instead of: "good morning, ladies & gentlemen" or "the women in the lab"
Try saying: "good morning, colleagues/everybody" or "the students in the lab"

Address gender as a spectrum rather than a binary.

Instead of: "both genders can attend" or "this item is for women or men"
Try saying: "all genders can attend" or "this item is for people of any gender"

Avoid terms that show gender bias in occupation.

Instead of: "policeman, cleaning lady, male nurse, female lawyer, chairman"
Try saying: "police officer, cleaner, nurse, lawyer, chairperson"

Avoid assuming heterosexual orientation.

Instead of: "bring your husband/wife" or "is that your girlfriend?"
Try saying: "bring your partner/spouse" or "is that your partner?"

Adapted from: "Inclusive Language Guidelines". UBC Writing and Style Guide. Public Affairs, University of British Columbia, 2013.

Avoid assuming gender pronouns of all participants.

Mis-gendering, or incorrectly assuming a person's gender, can be hurtful or embarrassing to a person. Please pay special attention to gendering people in third person, as this is often when mis-gendering occurs.

Instead of: "as she commented earlier" or "the men from group two"

Try saying: "as the student in the back row commented earlier" or "Alex and Xian from group two"

Use parallel terms or terms of equal status and avoid terms that imply gender inferiority. An example of this would be referring to male employees by their title (Mr., Dr., etc) but female employees by their first name. Don't refer to adult women as 'girls', 'gals' or 'ladies' in situations where you would refer to men as 'men'. Woman is the word that corresponds to man. In addition, terms of endearment for women, such as 'honey' and 'sweetie', are inappropriate to use in a classroom setting or workplace.

Mention physical appearance only if the description is relevant. For example, do not unnecessarily describe women by their physical attributes, such as saying 'she's the best looking lawyer I know'. Focusing on a person's physical appearance can trivialize and demean their accomplishments.

Avoid broad generalizations about gender. Making statements such as 'all women enjoy ...', 'that's just how men are' or references to what it means to be a 'real' man or 'real' woman can create assumptions and promote stereotypes about what people of certain genders can/can't do. It can also make people whose life experiences don't match your statement feel isolated and excluded.

If you don't know what pronouns to use for a person, ask. It is usually better to ask a person privately rather than in front of a group. Be polite and respectful, 'Which pronouns do you prefer to go by?' Then always use that pronoun and encourage others to do so. Learn about commonly used pronouns (see chart below). Continuing to use the wrong pronoun for a person after they have corrected you is disrespectful and can be considered a form of harassment.

Create a space where queer and trans students can have their identities affirmed. At the beginning of a term, consider making a statement in class such as, ‘Please let me know if anyone goes by a preferred name or preferred gender pronouns other than what is indicated in your student records’. Let students know that they can email you later or approach you privately after class.

Don’t assume you can ‘tell’ if someone is queer or trans. Trans and queer people don’t all look a certain way or come from the same background. Continue to use inclusive language and classroom practices (such as asking a group about their preferred gender pronouns) even if you don’t think that there are queer or trans people in the room.

Gender pronoun chart

The following chart is a quick reference guide to traditional and commonly used gender neutral pronouns in the English language. Many other pronouns exist, but this chart should help you conjugate any type of pronoun.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive adjective	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive	Pronunciation
She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself	pronounced as it looks
He	Him	His	His	Himself	pronounced as it looks
Ze	Zim	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	Pronounced as it looks
Sie/Zie	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself	pronounced: zee, here, here, heres, hereself
Zie	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	pronounced: zee, zere, zere, zeres, zereself
Ey	Em	Eir	Eirs	Eirself	pronounced: A, M, ear, ears, earsself
Per	Per	Pers	Pers	Persself	pronounced as it looks
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themself	Pronounced as it looks

Source: “Gender neutral pronouns”. Forge, 2013. <http://forge-forward.org>.