

# Inclusive writing

People do not want to feel excluded, or to be labelled inferior, either as individuals, or as members of a group. However, it is possible to exclude or imply inferiority without realising it, if insufficient care is taken with your writing. This study guide reviews the main ways in which inappropriate assumptions can be made within academic writing, and gives ideas about how to avoid this within your own writing.

There are many words that have been widely used traditionally, but which are based on outdated assumptions. A familiar example is words containing the word *man* e.g.: *chairman*, *manpower*, and *man-made*, the use of which can be taken to imply that women do not participate in these activities.

We also have a tradition of referring to people with disabilities, by their disability e.g.: calling a person with epilepsy ‘an epileptic’; and of using stereotypes with unhelpful presumptions of ‘normality’ and by implication ‘abnormality’. These problems are most commonly found within the fields of: **gender; disability; race; and sexual orientation**. Language with regard to these characteristics will be examined in turn within this Study Guide.

## The challenge

The appropriateness of language is a contested area that changes in the light of social debates and political agendas. It is not possible to prescribe appropriate language in all cases. The challenge is:

*“...to communicate in a manner that does not exclude particular individuals or groups. At the same time ... to avoid getting trapped in euphemisms and the ever-changing preferences of various “politically correct” factions—both liberal and conservative. It’s a balancing act, the basic premise of which is to treat people as individuals who are equal.”*

<http://ucommunications.colorado.edu/services/style-guide/inclusive-writing>

## Examples and references

This Study Guide uses examples taken from the following websites and book, which are all recommended references on this issue:

- American Psychological Association at <http://www.apastyle.org/manual/related/guidelines-reporting-and-writing.pdf>
- British Sociological Association at <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/equality>
- The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/gender.html>
- Brookes, I. & Marshall, D. (2004) *Good writing guide*. Edinburgh: Chambers.

## Examples of writing that is not inclusive

*“If we get an engineering student on the committee we’ll need to make sure that he can fit the meetings in around his project work”*

- this assumes that all engineering students are male.

*“We need to cater for the wives as well as the managers”*

- this implies firstly that all managers must be male; and secondly that they will have female partners.

*"The professors may need a little extra time in case they forget where they've parked"*

- this implies all professors are absent-minded and forgetful.

Such writing can make people feel:

	less important than others	defective	
irritated	that they have fewer rights		inappropriately stereotyped
	excluded	offended	
unvalued	abnormal		biased against

### Particular challenges within academic writing

If you are writing about, or conducting, research involving human participants, it may be essential that you report certain demographic details such as gender, race, ethnicity, and age. These details may be needed to inform the interpretation of the findings, and to support judgements about their generalisability. Such details may need to appear in any section of a piece of writing, from the literature review, through the method and findings sections, to the conclusions. The key questions to address are:

- **when** should we report these details?
- **how** should we refer to special interest groups?

Guiding principles are that:

- you need to record and describe the demographic details that are **relevant** to the conduct, findings, and generalisability of the research, but not the demographic details that are not;
- you need to take care that the descriptions you use would not offend people in the groups you are describing. Ideally you would use terms that people in those groups might use to describe themselves.

It is important to appreciate that what may sometimes seem to be a very minor difference in the label chosen can make a huge difference to the impact that label has on members of that group.

### General principles you can use to guide your writing

In addition to the guidance and examples given later, about specific areas where care needs to be taken, the following are some general principles that are useful to work to in all writing.

1. Avoid implying that people in a certain group are *abnormal* compared with the *normal* population e.g.: when comparing people with a disability with people who do not have that particular disability, use the term 'non-disabled' or 'people without a disability' rather than the word 'normal'.
2. Take care not to appear to use your own group as the reference group, thus implying both normality and superiority e.g.: describing a culture as 'culturally deprived' implies that it fails in comparison with, usually, western culture.
3. Keep in mind that differences arising from race or ethnic comparisons do not imply deficits.
4. Try to become routinely aware of any assumptions you are making regarding gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, or any other pattern or grouping.

5. Become familiar with websites, books, or articles, that give good guidance on this issue, such as those listed on the first page.

## Gender

An ever-present problem is how to avoid the potentially distracting over-use of ‘he’ or ‘she’ or ‘s/he’ scattered throughout a piece of writing, yet retain an essence of neutrality. Here are some ideas to help with this:

Use ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’ (only when the use of plurals would be acceptable) e.g.:

replace: “*Each respondent was asked whether he wished to participate*”

with: “*Respondents were asked whether they wished to participate*”.

Use ‘you’ to speak direct to the reader e.g.:

replace: “*The student should make sure she checks her references carefully*”

with: “*You should make sure you check your references carefully*”.

Changing the sentence to avoid the need to state a gender e.g.:

replace: “*The child should be given ample time to familiarise himself with the test material*”

with: “*Ample time should be allowed for the child to become familiar with the test material*”.

Another possibility is to alternate genders throughout a list, or by chapter.

As well as being explicit in pronouns such as *he, she, him, and her*, gender is implicit in many nouns themselves. This table lists examples of the kind of word to look out for, and offers some corresponding gender-neutral options.

<u>gendered noun</u>	<u>gender-neutral noun</u>
man in the street	people in general, people
manpower	workforce, labour force, employees
cameraman	camera operator
policeman	police officer
forefathers	ancestors
founding fathers	founders
old masters	classic art/artists
master copy	top copy/original
steward, stewardess	flight attendant
man-made	artificial, synthetic

## Disability

People with a disability usually prefer to be thought of first as individual people. They prefer not to be labelled primarily as victims; passively disabled; or labelled constantly with the name of their disability. The aim is to maintain the integrity of individuals e.g.:

- The term ‘disabled person’ implies that a person *as a whole* is disabled. It could be replaced with ‘person with (who has) a disability’.
- The term ‘epileptic’ equates the person with their condition. Instead you could write ‘person with epilepsy’.
- The term ‘stroke victim’ has superfluous, negative overtones of passivity and victim-hood. It would be preferable to write ‘individual who had had a stroke’.
- Similarly, the term ‘confined to a wheelchair’ could more respectfully be replaced by ‘person who uses a wheelchair’, changing from passive to active voice.

All of these suggestions put the individual person first, and refer to their disability second.

## Race

It is important to report details of race and ethnicity where they are necessary to describe or explain an aspect of method, analysis, or interpretation. Where this is essential, it is important to use acceptable labels. You need to be guided in acceptability by members of the groups you are describing, rather than by any standard practice you might be used to. Names and preferences change over time so it is important to check what is currently acceptable.

General guidance can be given, but this is, along with the rest of the guidance in this Study Guide, best practice only at the time of writing (2007), and will need to be checked for current validity at the time of use. Current advice is to:

- use positive descriptions/definitions such as *Asian*, which give people a name in their own right, rather than negative ones like *Non-White*, that define people relative to a supposed norm of 'whiteness';
- avoid saying *English* if you mean *British*: this could alienate some people you are including who are Scottish or Welsh rather than English;
- avoid hyphens in multiword labels e.g.: *Mexican Americans* is preferable to *Mexican-Americans*. The first is a description of some Americans, with the additional information in the adjective 'Mexican', while the second is a label or name;
- be aware of assumptions implicit in commonly used words and phrases such as: *illegal asylum seekers*, when to seek asylum is not in itself illegal; and the term *assimilation*, if you are really talking about *integration*;
- be aware that *ethnic minorities* is not necessarily the same as *Non-White* e.g.: the ethnic minority might be Irish or Welsh;
- When possible, authors should use the more specific rather than the less specific term (e.g., *Choctaws* is more specific than *American Indian*; *Cubans* is more specific than *Hispanic*).

## Sexual orientation

You need to acknowledge the existence of a range of sexual orientations. Careless wording can easily make people feel excluded, or abnormal. The table below gives some examples of careless writing, explains what the problem is, and suggests more acceptable wording.

Problematic Preferred	Sexual <b>preference</b> Sexual <b>orientation</b>
Comment	Using 'orientation' avoids the connotation of voluntary choice, and thereby potential blame, explicit in the word 'preference'
Problematic Preferred	Women's <b>sexual partners</b> should use condoms Women's <b>male sexual partners</b> should use condoms
Comment	Avoid assumption of heterosexuality
Problematic Preferred	AIDS education must extend beyond the gay male population to the <b>general population</b> AIDS education must not focus only on selected groups
Comment	Does not imply that gay men are set apart from the general population

## Conclusion

Because of the ingrained nature of cultural bias, it is possible to offend without having any intention to do so, and without noticing. It is therefore worth incorporating a specific scan for sensitive language within your usual revision or editing process. You can use the guidance in this Study Guide to devise your own check list. The references listed on the front page provide more examples and guidance on these and other areas of sensitivity.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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