

INCLUSIVE WRITING GUIDE



OCAPIA 
Oregon Commission on Asian
and Pacific Islander Affairs

OCBA 
Oregon Commission on Black Affairs

OCFW 
Oregon Commission For Women

OCHA 
Oregon Commission on Hispanic Affairs

OACO 
Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office

Introduction

Language matters. This Inclusive Writing Guide is designed to help the Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office (Agency) staff and Commissioners communicate in a way that serves the entire community.

Language is critical when navigating topics of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Inclusive writing shows that we listen and care, which helps build trust and credibility with our readers.

Language is fluid. Some individuals within groups disagree about terminology, which can discourage some from participating in discussions about identity because they don't want to "get it wrong" or offend someone. If we avoid difficult conversations, we are not helping to build an inclusive environment.

As our understanding of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability evolves, we must make informed choices about language and adopt a continuous improvement approach—striking a balance between following the lead of the individuals most affected, while using resources developed by experts to avoid overburdening those most affected.

Culturally conscious writers stay up to date on inclusive and equitable language, observing and learning how people and groups self-identify. This guide will be updated as terms and language evolve, and the Agency welcomes ongoing input and feedback.

All content produced by the Agency should meet these standards:

1. **Equity.** Our communications should reach the greatest number of people in our community by being culturally conscious, using clear language, translating our content into multiple languages, and using various communications channels.
2. **Simplicity.** All written communication should help community members access and understand State services, policies, and procedures. To this end, writers should use plain language, short sentences, and simple words to convey information. Avoid jargon, abbreviations, and technical language.
3. **Trust.** Agency written content should convey a sense of authority and respect—we want to be a trusted source of information. We accomplish this by ensuring our information is community-centered, accurate, and making it clear that the Agency is the author of the content.
4. **ADA Accessibility.** We create non-text alternatives, large print, speech/audio options, and symbols that can be accessed using all assistive technologies.

Best Practices

Mention race, ethnicity, disability, gender, and other identities only if relevant to the story.

Example: *Attaf Abbasi, supported construction of the new pump station in the neighborhood* instead of, *Pakistani resident, Attaf Abbasi, supported construction of the new pump station in the neighborhood.*

Avoid acronyms unless widely known, even on second reference.

Use people-first language. Use terms that focus on people rather than on the method of categorization to ensure your language is not dehumanizing.

Example: Use *people with mental illness* rather than the *mentally ill*.

Use gender-neutral terms.

Example: Use *they* instead of *he* or *she* if you do not know a person's pronouns.

Avoid terms that imply inferiority or superiority.

Example: Use *low socioeconomic status* rather than *lower class*. The word *status* is not interchangeable with *class* because *status* can refer to other measures such as popularity. Use *people who are systemically excluded* or *institutionally oppressed*, rather than *minority*.

Avoid negatively charged language.

Example: *Shanice uses a wheelchair* rather than, *Shanice is confined to a wheelchair. Kenji is diagnosed with bipolar disorder* not *Kenji suffers from bipolar disorder*.

Do not use victimizing language when referring to people with disabilities. Do not use *afflicted*, *restricted*, *stricken*, *suffering*, or *unfortunate*.

Avoid the use of idioms and catchphrases. They are difficult to translate and occasionally have ableist or racialized historical context.

Examples:

Craig was disappointed in the park design rather than *Craig thought the park design was lame*.

Quinton is a junior staff member rather than *Quinton is the low man on the totem pole*.

Racial and Cultural Terms

African American

No hyphen. Acceptable for an American Black person of African descent. The terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Americans of Caribbean heritage, for example, generally refer to themselves as Caribbean American. Follow a person's preference.

Asian American

No hyphen. Acceptable for an American of Asian descent. When possible, refer to a person's country of origin or follow the person's preference. For example: *Filipino American* or *Indian American*.

Do not refer to *Pacific Islanders* as *Asian Americans*, *Asians*, or *of Asian descent*.

AAPI

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The acronym is widely used by people within these communities, however many Pacific Islanders prefer to be addressed as a separate group, as such, the term is discouraged. Spell out the full term; use *AAPI* only in direct quotations and explain the term.

Do not use the term unless your content is specifically about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders as a group. Be specific when possible.

BIPOC

Black, indigenous, and people of color or *Black and indigenous People of Color*. The acronym was created to acknowledge and avoid erasure of the unique histories and experiences of oppression and exclusion experienced by Black and indigenous people when grouped with other people of color.

The acronym has been misused and has lost the spirit of its original intent. Spelling out acronyms is always preferable, but *BIPOC* or *Black, indigenous, and people of color* should only be used when Black and Indigenous communities are being highly prioritized—for example, if your communication shares details of a project that does not specifically prioritize Black or indigenous communities, use the terms *people of color* or *communities of color*. The Associated Press recommends avoiding the term.

Be aware that *BIPOC* is often used as a euphemism to avoid saying *Black* and as a virtue signal to seem inclusive without actually being inclusive. *BIPOC* or *Black, indigenous, and people of color* should only be used with precise specificity or within a direct quote.

Do not use *BIPOC* for an individual.

biracial, multiracial

Acceptable, when clearly relevant, to describe people with more than one racial heritage. Usually more useful when describing large, diverse groups of people rather than individuals. Avoid *mixed-race*, which can carry negative connotations, unless the subject prefers the term. Be specific if possible and then use *biracial* for people of two heritages or *multiracial* for those of two or more on subsequent references if needed. *Multiracial* can encompass people of any combination of races.

Examples:

She has an African American father and a white mother rather than *She is biracial*.

The study of biracial people showed a split in support along gender lines.

Black

Use the capitalized term *Black* as an adjective in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense: *Black people, Black culture, Black literature, Black studies, Black colleges*. The lowercase *black* is a color, not a person.

African American is also acceptable for those in the U.S. The terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Americans of Caribbean heritage, for example, generally refer to themselves as *Caribbean American*. Follow an individual's preference, if known, and be specific when possible and relevant.

Do not use the term as a singular noun: *Blacks*

Do not write in a way that assumes white is the default.

Examples:

The white officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black rather than *The officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black*.

Caucasian

Avoid as a synonym for *white*, unless in a quotation.

citizen

Avoid this term as it is not inclusive. We serve everyone, not just citizens. *Community members* or *residents* are more inclusive terms.

enslaved people

Use this term, not *slaves*. The term emphasizes that the slave status has been imposed on individuals. The term *slave* denotes an inherent identity of a person or people treated as chattel or property.

digital Blackface

Non-Black peoples' use of images, emojis, and memes featuring Black people online and in texts, often depicting exaggerated reactions.

Hawaii residents

Use the term *Hawaii residents*—not *Hawaiians*—for the overall population of Hawaii. Use the term *Hawaiian* or *Hawaiians* only for members of the ethnic group indigenous to the Hawaiian Islands. They also may be called *Native Hawaiians* or *Hawaii's Indigenous people*.

immigrant

Immigrant and refugee rights are increasingly under attack by U.S. institutions, while racially derogatory and dehumanizing language used in the media and political discourse has contributed to a rise in hate crimes against immigrants.

Avoid focusing on groups of immigrants or refugees in a way that misses the individuals that make up those groups. Be specific with countries of origin when possible and relevant.

Example:

Portland has a large Somali American population because of refugee resettlement.

Do not use the term *illegal* to refer to a person or their immigration status. By definition, a person is never *illegal*. The term is not only legally inaccurate, but also dehumanizes, is deliberately divisive, and fuels racial profiling. Use the term *undocumented* if it is relevant to the story or article.

indigenous

The term *indigenous* is a common synonym for the term *American Indian and Alaska Native* and *Native American*. But *indigenous* doesn't need to be capitalized unless it's used in context as a proper noun. For individuals, use the name of their tribe; if that information is not immediately available, try to obtain it.

Example:

- *Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Indigenous Peoples Conference*

Latino, Latina, Latinx, Latine

Latino is often the preferred noun or adjective for a person who is from or whose family origins are from a Latin American country. *Latina* is the feminine form. The gender-neutral term is *Latinx* or *Latine*. For groups of women or girls, use the plural *Latinas*; for groups of males or of mixed gender, use the plural *Latinos*. Use a more specific country of origin identification when possible, such as *Cuban*, *Puerto Rican*, *Colombian*, *Brazilian*, or *Mexican American*.

marginalized

The term is a euphemism and absolves our institution from acknowledging our role in contributing to oppression. Instead, use *systemically excluded and institutionally oppressed people*.

minority

Do not use the term *minority* when describing communities of color. People of color are not a global minority. The term minimizes systemically excluded people and promotes erasure. Instead, use *people of color* or *systemically excluded and institutionally oppressed people*.

multilingual

A strengths-based term that acknowledges and respects that many people who benefit from increased language access with our City government are often fluent in multiple languages. The term, *limited English proficiency*, can be used when used in legal context or in a direct quotation.

Native People

Use *Native People* or *indigenous people* to start, knowing that others may have other preferences. This term is not historically loaded. For individuals, use the name of the tribe; if that information is not immediately available, try to obtain it.

Pacific Islander

Used to describe the indigenous people of the Pacific Islands, including but not limited to Hawaii, Guam, and Samoa. Should be used for people who are ethnically Pacific Islander, not for those who happen to live in Pacific Islands. Be specific about which communities you are referring to whenever possible.

people of color

The term is acceptable, when necessary, in broad references to multiple races other than white.

Example:

We will hire more people of color. Nine playwrights of color collaborated on the script.

Be aware, however, that many people of various races object to the term for various reasons, including that it lumps together into one monolithic group anyone who isn't white.

Be specific whenever possible by referring to, for instance, *Black Americans*, *Chinese Americans*, or *members of the Klamath Tribe*.

Examples:

The poll found that Black and Latinx Americans are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's financial impact, not people of color are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's financial impact.

Most of the magazine's readers are Black women, rather than most of the magazine's readers are women of color.

In some cases, other wording may be appropriate.

Examples:

people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds; diverse groups; various heritages; different cultures.

Do not use *person of color* for an individual.

Do not use the shorthand *POC* unless necessary in a direct quotation; when used, explain it.

race-related language

Be aware that some words and phrases that seem innocuous to one group can carry negative connotations to another. Be sensitive to your varied audiences and their different perceptions of language and the larger world.

For instance, many people see *thug* as code for a racial slur and *unarmed Black man* could be seen as assuming the default is for Black men to be armed.

underrepresented

The term is a euphemism and absolves our institution from acknowledging our role in contributing to oppression. Instead, use *systemically excluded and institutionally oppressed people*.

white

Do not capitalize when referring to one's race. It's important to note that *white* and *whiteness* are a social construct that serves to reinforce power structures.

Generally, white people do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color. Capitalizing the term *white*, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs.

Do not use the term as a singular noun: *whites*

Do not write in a way that assumes white is the default.

Example:

The white officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black rather than *The officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black*.

woke

A slang term that originally described enlightenment or awakening about issues of racial and other forms of social justice. Some people and groups, especially conservatives, now use it in a derogatory sense implying what they see as overreactions. Avoid using the term other than in direct quotations; enclose in quotation marks when used.

Disability Terms

able-bodied

This term is often used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. The term *non-disabled* is also acceptable. As with most terms, follow an individual's preference, if known.

disabilities

Avoid writing that implies *ableism*: the belief that typical abilities—those of people who are non-disabled—are superior. Also avoid stereotyping phrasing that equates *thin* or *able-bodied* with health. Ableism is a concept similar to racism, sexism, and ageism in that it includes stereotypes, generalizations and demeaning views and language. It is a form of discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

Do not describe an individual as having a disability unless it is clearly pertinent to the story.

Example:

Sonia, who is blind and walks with the help of a guide dog, said they are pleased with the City's walkway improvements rather than Zhang, who has paraplegia, is a fan of the Portland Trail Blazers.

Be specific about the type of disability, or symptoms.

Example:

Claire, who has autism and is very sensitive to sounds, said she's happy the Administrative Building has provided sound-dampening architecture in working spaces.

When possible, ask people how they prefer to be described. Some view their disability as central to their identity and use identity-first language such as *paraplegic man* or *a paraplegic*.

Others prefer person-first language such as *a man with paraplegia*. You may use the adjective *blind* to describe a person who identifies as having almost complete vision loss or lack of vision. Use *low vision* to describe a person who identifies as having limited vision.

In describing groups of people, or when individual preferences can't be determined, use person-first language.

Avoid using disability-related words lightly or in unrelated situations.

Examples:

Calling a person or an idea *crazy, lame, demented, psychotic, blind, catatonic, moronic, on the spectrum*, etc.; saying a plan *falls on deaf ears* or *he turned a blind eye*, or *the awards show is schizophrenic*.

As in all writing, consider word choice carefully. Some people with mobility disabilities feel that we are not speaking about them when we rely very heavily on the term *walking*. In these cases, it is best to either clarify that walking is inclusive of people who use mobility devices, or to use terms like *walking and rolling* for inclusivity.

Words that seem innocuous to some people can have specific and deeply personal or offensive meanings to others. Consider alternative phrasing.

Other language or constructions not to use:

- Words that suggest pity, such as *afflicted with, battling, or suffers from* any disability or illness, or that *a person overcame her disability*. Instead: *living with dementia, has cancer*, etc.
- Clichés such as *inspiring* and *brave*.
- Dehumanizing mass terms such as *the disabled, the blind, the mentally ill*, etc. As with all writing, avoid broad generalizations, labels, and stereotypes.
- Negative language such as *confined to a wheelchair* or *wheelchair-bound*. Instead, use terms like *wheelchair user*.

mental illness

Mental illness is a general term. Specific conditions are disorders and should be used whenever possible. Avoid descriptions that connote pity, such as *afflicted with, suffers from, victim of, battling, and demons*. Do not use terms related to mental health casually, in unrelated context such as: *His emails gave me PTSD*, when the person does not actually experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Avoid terms such as *the mentally ill*. Instead: *people with mental illnesses*. Do not use wording such as: *he is a schizophrenic, she was anorexic, or he is mentally ill*. Instead, use: *he was diagnosed with schizophrenia, they were diagnosed with anorexia, or he was treated for depression*.

Descriptive language and context are important and improvements over labels. Instead of *Bob is a schizophrenic*, use *Bob is a person with schizophrenia*. Better yet: *Bob's experience includes hearing voices. He also sometimes has fears which make him reluctant to join groups of people*.

Gender and LGBTQIA2S+ Terms

cisgender

Describes people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth; that is, not transgender. Explain if necessary. Do not use terms like *normal* to describe people who are not transgender. Not synonymous with *heterosexual*, which refers to sexual orientation.

deadnaming

The act of calling a transgender person by an incorrect name. Often, this is a name they were given at birth and no longer use.

gay, lesbian

Used to describe people attracted to the same sex, though *lesbian* is the more common term for women. Include sexual orientation only when it is pertinent to a story. Sexual orientation is not synonymous with gender.

gender-affirming care

Gender-affirming care refers to a swath of mental and medical treatments (such as counseling, hormones or surgery) that help bring a person's gender expression (such as voice, appearance or anatomy) in line with their gender identity. It can be, but is not necessarily part of a gender transition. Such care is not limited to transgender people; it can also serve cisgender, nonbinary or intersex people.

If surgery is involved, gender-affirming or gender-affirmation surgery. Do not use abbreviations such as GAS, GCS or SRS unless in quotations, and introduce the full term before the quote. Do not use the outdated term sex change, and avoid describing someone as pre-op or post-op.

gender and sexuality

Gender is not synonymous with sex. Gender refers to a person's social identity, while sex refers to biological characteristics.

gender expression

How people outwardly convey their gender, intentionally or not, such as through fashion choices, mannerisms or pronouns. Gender stereotypes can lead others to incorrectly perceive someone's gender or sexual orientation.

gender-nonconforming

Acceptable in broad references to describe people whose identities or expressions do not follow gender norms. May include but is not synonymous with *transgender*.

Avoid dated terminology such as *gender-bending* or *tomboy*.

LGBTQIA2S+

This acronym is constantly being updated and stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-spirit. While each letter in *LGBTQIA2S+* stands for a specific group of people, the term encompasses the entire spectrum of gender fluidity and sexual identities. Use of *LGBTQIA2S+* is best as an adjective and an umbrella term. Don't use it, for example, when the group you're referring to is limited to *bisexuals*.

misgendering

The act of using the wrong pronouns when talking to or about someone.

nonbinary

People are nonbinary if their gender identity is not strictly male or female. *Nonbinary* isn't synonymous with *transgender*. In stories about people who identify as neither male nor female or ask not to be referred to as he/she/him/her, use the person's name in place of a pronoun, or otherwise reword the sentence, whenever possible.

Use terms that do not assume binary identities:

- *Pregnant people* rather than *pregnant women*
- *Reproductive rights* rather than *women's health rights*
- *Menstrual products* or *period products* rather than *feminine hygiene products*

Using *they/them* pronouns when referring to a single person when the gender isn't known or you're using generic language is advisable, rather than *he/she*.

Example:

Whoever the top engineering candidate is, they will be notified in the coming months.

Pride, pride

Capitalize *Pride* when referring to events or organizations honoring LGBTQIA2S+ communities and on subsequent references. Lowercase *pride* when referring to generic events or the general concept of LGBTQIA2S+ pride.

pronouns

Use this word and never *preferred pronouns*. Pronouns are who you are and are not a preference.

Also, use gender-neutral text whenever possible, for example:

- *Residents should take out their recycling* rather than *A resident should take out his or her recycling*
- Don't call groups of people *guys*. Good alternatives for addressing groups include: *colleagues, friends, folks, everyone*.

sexual orientation

This is the accurate description of an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex and is inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, as well as straight men and women.

Use terms that are not offensive:

- *Sexual orientation* rather than *sexual preference*
- *Gay lives* rather than *gay lifestyle*
- *Gay man, lesbian, or gay person* rather than *homosexual*

transgender

An adjective that refers to someone whose assigned sex at birth does not match their gender identity. Do not use *transgender* as a noun or use the term *transgendered*.

Best practice examples:

- *Tony is a transgender man.*
- *The parade included many transgender people.*
- *Julio is a nonbinary transgender person.*

transition

The legal, medical, or social processes some transgender or nonbinary people undergo to match their gender identity. Examples can include a formal or informal change to names or pronouns, makeup and hairstyles, hormone therapy, or gender-affirmation surgery. Mention or describe it only when relevant. *Detransition* is acceptable as a verb to describe the reversing of a gender transition.

Additional Terms

citizen

We serve all community members, not just (U.S.) citizens. Avoid this term and use more inclusive language like *community member*, *community*, or *residents*.

gentrification

- Gentrification has two components: investment and displacement. Investment is overwhelmingly in service of attracting or serving new, wealthier, white residents. Displacement is what happens when rising housing prices push out longtime, lower-income residents who are often people of color.
- When writing about gentrification, avoid using it as a buzzword. Center displacement in the conversation, and the need for policies that promote equitable development and preserve affordable housing. Displacement is something with real impacts that can be prevented through policy and action, whereas gentrification can sound like a “natural” and unavoidable market process.

homelessness

Homelessness is generally acceptable as an adjective to describe the experience of people without a fixed residence. Avoid the dehumanizing collective noun *the homeless*, instead, use people-first language: *people experiencing homelessness*, *people experiencing houselessness*, *people without housing*, or *people without homes*.

neurodiversity, neurodivergent, neurodiverse, and neurotypical

Neurodiversity is the concept that differences in brain functioning such as *autism*, *dyslexia*, or *attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder* are normal variations, with strengths and weaknesses. It is not a medical term. Individuals or groups that exhibit those variations are considered *neurodivergent* or *neurodiverse*. The larger population is said to be *neurotypical*.

older adult

Refrain from using words like *senior* and *elderly* when describing people of an older age, and instead use the term *older adult* when describing individuals aged 65 and over.

pregnant people

Use this term when you want to be inclusive of people who have this experience but do not identify as women.

riot

The word *riot* connotes meaningless violence, where people have lost touch with reason and given into baser instincts. But it also has a loaded racial dimension in the U.S., as a term that's long been used to drum up the image of Black people wreaking senseless chaos in cities.

John A. Powell, the founding director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, said of the myriad demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd: "Riot suggests pandemonium. What's happening across the country and across the world is a call for justice, a call for police accountability and for the recognition that Black lives matter too."

In the context of racial justice protests, for example, consider using the term, *demonstration* instead.

suicide

Use the phrase *died by suicide*. Avoid the phrase *committed suicide*, which evokes associations with committing a crime or a sin. It also ignores the fact that suicide is often the consequence of an unaddressed illness like depression, trauma, or another mental health issue.

Also, if a story involves suicide, it is often advisable to place a warning at the beginning of the story so those who experience trauma around the subject are aware.

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