



Style Guide for Inclusive Communications

This guide is intended to facilitate inclusive communication for K–12 school districts. The guidance in this document will be most effective as part of a larger cohesive strategy to ensure equity and inclusion within a district. While this document provides a general overview of some common terms, scenarios and considerations that may arise in the school community, it is by no means exhaustive. Links to additional resources are provided throughout the document.

Inclusive communications is an evolving practice; this is a living document that will be reviewed and updated regularly as new guidance emerges. To suggest updates or to provide recommendations, please contact portfolio@neric.org.

CONTENTS

Style Guide for Inclusive Communications	1
Ability	2
Identity	3
Family Formation and Socioeconomics	6
Sexuality and Gender	8
Youth and Aging	9
Additional Resources	9

Ability

Avoid language that ascribes a **negative association** to disability, mental illness or addiction.

These include “blind spot,” “a deaf ear,” “a blind eye,” “lame,” “spaz,” and other words or expressions that stigmatize physical disability, as well as phrases like “I’m so OCD about my schedule” or “This cake is like crack to me.” Avoid negative or demeaning language for people with disabilities, mental illness, or substance use.

Use neutral or active language when referring to someone’s disability, injury, illness or addiction. Avoid language that suggests suffering, affliction or struggle unless that information is known and relevant to the information being shared.

- **Example:** “Mr. Mahsood **uses a wheelchair**” (not “Mr. Mahsood *is wheelchair-bound*”).
- **Example:** “Andrea Navarro **has anxiety**” (not “Andrea Navarro *suffers from anxiety*”).
- **Example:** “They are **in recovery from addiction**” (not “They *struggle with addiction*”).

For more guidance: National Center on Disability and Journalism, [Disability Language Style Guide](#); Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, [General Guidelines for Reducing Bias](#).

Speak to audiences of **all abilities**.

Use language that is accessible to audiences of all abilities and cognitive levels. Avoid the use of jargon. Write in the active voice, using clear and direct language. Explain acronyms or other terms of the profession in plain language.

For more guidance: The [Hemingway Editor](#) provides a readability index and word count for any text.

Structure information clearly.

Provide “sign posts” in your writing, such as subheadings, bullet points and other structural cues that allow readers to clearly follow the information being presented. Use these “sign posts” consistently throughout your content so that their significance can clearly be understood.

Avoid complex presentations of information (such as tables or complicated flow charts) if a plain text version would suffice. If a visual diagram is necessary, provide a written description of the information.

For digital content, use descriptive link text that clearly indicates where the user will be taken when they click the link.

- **Example:** If linking to a document titled “Health History Form,” use the words “Health History Form” as your link text, rather than “click here” or simply “Form”).

Use accessible formats.

Present information as plain text (rather than as an attachment or download) where possible so that readers can scan and/or scale the content as needed on their device. Audiences may not be able to open, read or understand attachments such as PDFs, Powerpoints and Excel spreadsheets, depending on their ability, device and software access. Provide [alt text](#) for all images.

For more guidance: visit [Digital.gov](https://www.digit.gov) or WC3's [Introduction to Web Accessibility](#).

Identity

For more guidance: consult the [National Association of Black Journalists Style Guide](#) and the [Disability Language Style Guide](#).

Use language that reflects what people call themselves.

Take the time to find out what words a person or group uses for their identities and experiences, rather than making assumptions. Match the descriptions each person provides for themselves. However, do not include descriptions of race, gender, ability or age unless they are relevant to the information being shared. If you are writing or speaking about someone whose pronouns you do not know, try to “write around” the use of pronouns by using their name, rather than assuming which pronoun to use, or use “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun.

When meeting someone or introducing yourself, share your pronouns and ask the other person for theirs, such as, “Hi, I’m Ms. Li. My pronouns are she/her. What are your pronouns?” Ask before using a title such as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” when addressing an adult, such as, “May I call you Mr. Hernandez?” or “How would you like to be addressed?” If you do not have the opportunity to ask about someone’s title, consider using their full name in correspondence, such as, “Dear Raj Patel.”

Use person-centered language unless otherwise indicated.

When talking about groups you aren’t a member of, do not use an identity as a stand-in for a person or a group. Refer to “people with disabilities” instead of “the disabled;” “transgender people” instead of “transgenders” or “the transgendered;” etc. However, if someone self-identifies as “deaf” rather than “a deaf person,” follow their lead.

Similarly, use racial and religious identification as an adjective, rather than a noun (“Black people” instead of “Blacks”), unless an individual or group identifies that way.

Be aware that one person's definition of disability may vary from the next.

- **Example:** A person with autism may not consider themselves to be disabled, but may identify as autistic.

Choose visuals that **accurately reflect the full diversity** of your community.

Diversity encompasses far more than race. Your school community contains people of diverse ages, national origins, gender identities, sexual orientations, physical and developmental abilities, socioeconomic statuses, religious beliefs, parental and marital statuses, educational backgrounds, veteran status, citizenship, income and employment. Within your school community, you have educators and students with varied interests, tastes, fashions, personalities and identities.

While no single image can capture the full range of diversity within your district, each image becomes part of a larger story the district is telling about itself.

While each school district contains a broad spectrum of beliefs, experiences and affinities, the imagery that you select should not **overstate or misrepresent** what that diversity looks like. Avoid **tokenism**, when a small number of people are repeatedly or prominently featured in such a way that suggests the district is more diverse in some areas than it may truly be.

When selecting images to use in your communications, consider the following questions:

- **Who is missing or excluded?** Can everyone see someone like themselves represented in these photos?
- **Would I want to be portrayed this way?** If this was a photo of me or someone I love, would I be okay with how they are represented?
- **Are any stereotypes being perpetuated in the photo I am using?** Am I depicting someone in the role our culture typically puts them in, or making a more unexpected choice?
- **Do these images accurately represent our community?** Does this look like a picture of my district? Does this combination of images truly showcase the types of diversity that are found in this community?

Write **without stereotyping**.

Be aware of stereotypes about race, gender, sexual orientation or physical ability. When writing about an individual who may be marginalized, examine your writing for any descriptions that reinforce stereotypes. Ask yourself if you would write the same way about someone of a different race, gender, sexual orientation or physical ability. If the answer is “no,” that may be an indication that you are being influenced by stereotypes about your subject.

Note that biased writing is not always critical or pejorative. Bias can also be present when something is being characterized in positive terms or praise; however, perpetuating these stereotypes is just as harmful.

In the 1980s, sports journalists and fans often used different language to describe NBA stars Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. Bird was often characterized as “hard-working,” while Johnson was described as “naturally gifted,” reinforcing stereotypes about race. Other examples of this include: describing a person of color as “articulate,” suggesting that someone of Asian descent is “naturally” skilled at math or science, or expressing surprise when a woman excels in a field that has traditionally been dominated by men, such as the construction trades.

For more guidance: [Stereotypes and Biased Language](#), Purdue Online Writing Lab; [Inclusive Language Guide](#), Colorado State University.

Use **specific** (not coded) language.

Speak clearly and directly about expectations for students, and about students themselves. Terms such as “achievement gap,” “underachieving” and “at-risk” can inaccurately portray the reality of the situation.

Seek precise language rather than vague terms or catchphrases.

- **Example:** It is more precise to say that your school district serves a majority of Black, Latinx and/or Indigenous students, rather than referring to it as a “minority” population.
- **Example:** Referring to an “achievement gap” between Black and white students obscures the inequities that lead to disparate outcomes between privileged and less privileged students.

Use racial or ethnic terminology **only when relevant**.

Include race and/or ethnicity to describe individuals only when relevant. Using these terms unwarranted can be perceived as offensive. Avoid using language that assumes characteristics of individuals due to race or ethnicity.

Use appropriate terminology and capitalization when writing about race or ethnicity. For example, using terms such as “BIPOC” and “brown” are only recommended when used in a direct quote. The AP Style Book does not advise to capitalize “white” when referring to an individual’s race.

For more guidance: [A Guide to Coded Language in Education](#) (content warning for language); [Racial Justice in Education](#).

Family Formation and Socioeconomics

Recognize **diverse family formation**.

In written and other communications, including forms and official documents, consider “parent/ caregiver” instead of “mother,” “father” or just “parent.” Consider whether it is appropriate to refer to “your child,” knowing that the recipient of your communications may be a guardian who is not the parent of that child.

If your district recognizes celebrations such as Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, or hosts events such as “Doughnuts with Dads,” ensure that other types of non-parental caregivers — including single parents, grandparents and non-related caregivers — are also honored and included.

Use language that is mindful of **the pressures families may face** outside of school.

For many households, weekends, breaks and time off school can be stressful, rather than fun or relaxing. When addressing families, take these circumstances into consideration when you are referring to what happens outside of school.

Your audience may include people who are unemployed, self-employed, required to work early mornings, late nights or weekends; receiving benefits; and transient or in unstable housing. Your audience may not have access to a backyard, vacations, a car, a private bedroom, a refrigerator or a stove.

- **Example:** A homework assignment can direct a student to read a book “outside of school with an adult,” rather than “Read this book in your room at bedtime with your Mom or Dad.”
- **Example:** An end-of-year newsletter can wish families “a safe and healthy summer,” rather than saying, “I’m sure we are all looking forward to some rest and relaxation.”

Use **person-first language** about poverty and homelessness.

Use language such as “experiencing homelessness” or “experiencing poverty.” Avoid terms such as *hobo, needy, poverty-stricken, less fortunate, at-risk* or *impoverished*.

Avoid reinforcing stereotypes about communities. Center the experiences of the people within a community, rather than an outsider’s perspective of that community, when writing about it.

Be specific if writing about a block, neighborhood, community or population with regard to inequalities, rather than describing a neighborhood as “troubled,” “run-down,” “dangerous” or “the ghetto.”

→ **Example:** “Valerie grew up on the East Side in the 1990s, at a time when many people in her neighborhood experienced poverty and unemployment.”

For more guidance: read Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, [“Covering Poverty.”](#)

Sexuality and Gender

For more guidance: consult [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#), 11th Edition.

Understand and respect the **difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.**

Sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are not synonymous. For a better understanding, refer to Portfolio's 2018 release, "[Navigating sensitive conversations about gender identity](#)," for more on this topic.

Avoid the use of **gender-specific terms** unless relevant.

Seek out terms and titles that do not specify gender. Examples include:

- **"People"** (instead of "women and men")
- **"Children"** or **"students"** (instead of "boys and girls")
- **"Siblings"** or **"relatives"** (instead of "brothers and sisters")
- **"Partner"** or **"spouse"** (instead of "husband or wife")
- **"Firefighter"** and **"council member"** (instead of "fireman" or "councilman")
- When addressing a group: **"Folks," "guests"** or **"friends"** (instead of "you guys" or "ladies and gentlemen")

Avoid adding gender-specific modifiers to someone's profession or role. Use, for example, *professor* rather than *female professor* or *nurse* rather than *male nurse*.

Use **'they'** as a singular pronoun.

When presenting a generalization or speaking in the abstract, use "they," including as a singular pronoun, rather than choosing a masculine or feminine term.

- **Example:** "When a student enters our school, they are welcomed ..." (instead of "he is welcomed" or "he or she is welcomed").
- **Example:** "Once our new teacher is in place, we will introduce them to the school community" (instead of "introduce him/her").

Avoid identifying members of the LGBTQ+ community **without permission.**

When referring to individuals, it is critical to ask permission when identifying them as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. This is critical in preventing anyone being 'outed' without their consent.

Youth and Aging

For more guidance: [Young People and Ageist Language, Conscious Style Guide](#).

Avoid references to age unless necessary and relevant.

If a reference to age is necessary, use specifics rather than generalizations (“older than 65” rather than “elderly,” or “a grade-school student” instead of “a child”).

Be aware of stereotypes based on age.

Ageist language may characterize someone as “feeble” when they are old, and “bratty” or “acting up” when they are young. Using fact-based descriptors to describe people and events can help avoid stereotyping and generalizations.

Additional Resources

- [Diversity Style Guide](#) (Society of Professional Journalists)
- [Guide to Cultural Awareness](#) (National PTA)
- [Guidelines for Inclusive Language](#) (Linguistic Society of America)
- [How to Be Inclusive and Grammatically Correct: A Guide for Journalists on the Gender Beat](#) (Media Diversity Institute)
- [Inclusive Language Guide \(Colorado State University\)](#)
- [Tips for Culturally Informed Communication](#) (National School Public Relations Association)