

# Avoiding Sexist, Ableist, and Racist Language—A Beginner’s Guide



*Please note that the suggestions herein are just a starter in what type of language is more inclusive. Language is always changing, updating, and we find ourselves creating new meanings for words regularly. For an up-to-date guide on most forms of inclusive (and exclusive) language, please visit the Conscious Style Guide (linked on our website and below).*

## *Sexist Language:*

### **What is it?:**

Occurs when we express in writing or speech a narrow view of a woman’s or man’s role in society (often completely erasing nonbinary individuals). These false binaries often focus on occupations, personal characteristics (temperament, ability, and appearance), or familial roles, among *many* others.

### **Why should we avoid it?:**

As mentioned, sexist language often only focuses on the binary of male/female, ignoring or outright rejecting those who do not fall into either category. Additionally, it supposes ideas including the above categories, about those who do identify as male or female, often stereotyping these individuals. Additionally, it can hurt those who are written about in this manner.

### **What should we do?:**

*Avoid slang or negative terms* for individuals or groups. Instead of “wench” or “broad,” for example, stick to “woman” or “female” when you do know how the individuals identify. Otherwise, “person” or “individual” works as a useful, more inclusive, replacement.

*Don’t make assumptions* about familial roles or occupations. If you’re using a job title, consider more inclusive terms. Instead of mailman, consider mail carrier. Instead of fireman, consider firefighter. Additionally, don’t assume all moms are stay-at-home and all dads are breadwinners, these may be reversed or nonexistent in single-parent and/or LGBT+ households.

*Avoid the generic “he”* to refer to both genders. Now, they is recognized as a singular pronoun and is a more inclusive choice which allows for *all* genders to be represented.

## *Ableist Language:*

### **What is it?:**

Occurs when we express in writing or speech a narrow or outdated view of those with disabilities and/ or illnesses including mental illness.

### **Why should we avoid it?:**

Often this language focuses on the person's disability (or disabilities) or ailment(s) instead of who they are. When we use this language, we can (unintentionally) oppress these individuals or limit them to only one aspect of who they are or how they identify.

### **What should we do?:**

*Use person-first language* when writing about people with disabilities. Focus on the person, not the diagnosis. For example, instead of writing "epileptics," write "people with epilepsy."

*Avoid language that addresses abilities everyone might not have* whenever possible. Instead of writing something like, "The author speaks to this point," try focusing on the fact that "the author explains." Or, instead of mentioning "We see this happen when..." try "We encounter this idea when..."

*Avoid colloquial language* that not only may be unclear to non-native English learners but also is often offensive to members of these groups. Expressions like "turning a blind eye" or "hysterical story" have long and exclusive histories that may offend. Consider options like "ignoring" or "humorous story" instead to respect the experiences of others.

### *Racist Language:*

#### **What is it?:**

This language focuses on stereotypes and generalizations which broadly define individuals as a group instead of their own persons. Usually, but not always, this language relies on clear prejudices about a race or ethnic group.

#### **Why should we avoid it?:**

This language is exclusive and reduces a person to a member of an underrepresented group instead of taking their own personal history, characteristics, etc. into account. It assumes the experiences of the individual and applies negative or loaded terminology to them.

#### **What should we do?:**

*Avoid outdated terms.* Just because they're used in a historical document, by a different generation, or by members of the group which they define, it does not mean you can use them. These terms have a history of oppression behind them that, unless you are a member of the oppressed group, you cannot access or fully understand.

*Use person-centered language.* Don't narrow a person or group to a term which describes their race or ethnic background. For example, instead of using the term Jews, write Jewish people or people of the Jewish faith. This effort to be inclusive and look at these groups as made up of individual people avoids reductive language.

*Research your terms.* When in doubt, for all of these—especially if you’re writing in a language other than your home language—research the terms you are considering using. The Conscious Style Guide, dictionaries and thesauri in the language in which you’re writing, and your professors can offer some guidance to put you on the right track.

*Resources for further study:*

- Conscious Style Guide: <https://consciousstyleguide.com>
- Linguistic Society of America: <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/guidelines-inclusive-language>
- MyPronouns.org: <https://www.myprouns.org/inclusivelanguage>

*If you are a student at Illinois Wesleyan and you have not been supported or advocated for, particularly in regard to inclusive language use, please consider contacting one (or more) of the following:*

- Office of Diversity and Inclusion at IWU: <https://www.iwu.edu/diversity/>
- Office of Student Accessibility Services at IWU: <https://www.iwu.edu/accessibility/>
- The WCTS Director, Anna Scanlon: [ascanlon@iwu.edu](mailto:ascanlon@iwu.edu)

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