

CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE



AT CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW, WE ARE COMMITTED TO FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENT. THIS RESEARCHED GUIDE AIMS TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNICATING WITH AND ABOUT PEOPLE OF ALL CULTURES, BACKGROUNDS, IDENTITIES, AND EXPERIENCES.



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INTRODUCTION

At CUNY School of Law, we are committed to fostering an inclusive environment. This guide aims to provide guidance for communicating with and about people of all cultures, backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

Language is constantly evolving, and this guide is a living document. We encourage feedback and suggestions from our community to ensure it remains relevant and effective. Remember that individual preferences may vary, and when in doubt, it's always best to ask how a person would like to be addressed or described.

Reach out to communications@law.cuny.edu to share your feedback.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Focus on the whole person, not just one aspect of their identity. Make room for complexity and the interconnectedness of different communities.

Consider context. What is being accomplished by noting the characteristic, experience, or identity? Is it necessary?

Ask individuals for their preferred language and avoid euphemisms and outdated terms.

Use person-first language when appropriate, but respect identity-first language preferences.

Recognize and challenge your own biases and cultural defaults.

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

Ability & Disability

Whenever possible, ask for someone's preferred terminology. One person with an auditory disability may prefer "deaf," while another person with a similar disability may prefer "person with low or limited loss of hearing."

Be aware of the ways disabilities or people with disabilities can be described:

- Disabled
- Has/with a disability
- Has/with a chronic health condition
- Neuroatypical or Neurodivergent
- Has/with an intellectual disability
- Has/with a cognitive disability
- With a physical disability
- With a mobility disability
- Uses a wheelchair/crutches/cane

Avoid euphemistic phrases such as handicapped, special needs, specially abled, differently abled or different abilities

Consider instead: disabled person or person with a disability, wheelchair-user, etc.(referring to individuals); disability/ability statuses (referring to an identity/social category)

Combat mental health stigma: PTSD, OCD, and ADD are official mental health diagnoses. Using these terms to describe everyday behaviors trivializes the impact of someone's real, lived experiences with a mental disorder.

Avoid crazy, insane, nuts, etc. Consider instead what you really mean: surprising, overwhelming, extraordinary, and more.

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

Ethnicity, Race & Nationality

BIPOC

Typically reserved for contextualizing data and numbers rather than people, BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous and People of Color meant to include people and communities who have been systematically harmed and oppressed by dominant, white society. Be aware that using this as shorthand to encompass people who are not white often is advancing Othering and centering a white narrative by creating a false dichotomy of white or BIPOC.

Capitalize the B in Black

It is important to capitalize “Black” when referring to (and out of respect for) the Black diaspora, including Black people, Black communities, Black culture, Black institutions, etc.

Caucasian vs. white

Unless required by external reports or entities, we do not use “Caucasian,” a term historically used to invoke a pseudo science of racial classification; instead, we would use “white.” Note: it is never capitalized in CUNY Law content.

Indigenous People vs. Peoples

The plural “peoples” can be used to recognize that more than one distinct group comprises the Indigenous population of a land. In some contexts, using “Indigenous people” may seem homogenizing. In contrast, “Indigenous peoples” (plural) indicates a broad group that includes a number of separate Indigenous populations. Only use the terms native, aboriginal, and First Nation when an individual has done so in connection with themselves; don’t be afraid to ask them if you have it right.

Traditional, Ancestral and Unceded Territory

Use “traditional territory” in recognition of lands traditionally used and/or occupied by a group, and “ancestral” for lands handed down to subsequent generations, but only if you know this to be the case. “Unceded” refers to land not turned over to the government by treaty or some other agreement.

Model Minority Myth

Created as a social construct to define the Asian American experience during the 1960s, this harmful construct created a racial divide in an attempt to invalidate the experiences and struggles of other racial groups. The masked struggles neglect to highlight the diversity within Asian Americans and the unique issues within the varying ethnicities.

Rejecting “Master” Terminology

Consider, dependent on context, terms such as main, primary, universal, host, source, expert. Examples: Universal Password Log, primary bedroom, web administrator, etc.

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

Gender, Sex & Sexuality

Pronouns

The fact that they are personal and preferred is evident—they are specific to us as individuals and we would all like them to be used correctly. Adding these terms only serves to imply otherwise. Volunteer yours, don't be afraid to ask others for theirs, and be conscious of not outing anyone's gender identity if they are comfortable using one set of pronouns within our community but another in public or with family.

LGBTQ2IA+

Our preferred, inclusive acronym for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit, Asexual and more community. An acceptable alternative is LGBTQ+. Whenever appropriate or possible, use the most applicable specific language or terms of identity that have been self-described to you.

Gender-Neutral and Gender Expansive Titles

Assumptions and assignments are to be avoided by using terms that are inclusive.

Consider: folks; allies; crew; friends; colleagues; peers; spouse; partner; parents; sibling; pregnant person; child; little one

Transgender Affirmation & Inclusion

Just as pronouns matter, names matter, too. Once someone has introduced (or reintroduced) themselves by name, using the name associated with a gender with which they do not identify is hurtful or traumatic and is referred to as dead naming. Similarly, we don't refer to "real" names if a legal or government name does not yet match the name a person uses in our community.

Trans and cis isn't a binary

Trans is first and foremost a descriptive term and is not always an identity term. Is there a single term for everyone who isn't cisgender? Short answer: no.

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

Immigration & Non-citizenship

No human being is illegal, nor are they considered alien.

Carefully consider who you might include or exclude when using terms around citizenship and be cognizant of the trap of the good immigrant/bad immigrant false dichotomy.

Asylum

An asylum seeker can become an undocumented immigrant only if he or she remains after having failed to respond to a removal notice.

DREAMers

Young undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children are referred to as DREAMers (retaining capitalization of the DREAM Act).

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

Mass Incarceration & the Police

The Marshall Project's 2021 initiative, The Language Project, is a great resource for practical language guidance as well as articles and perspectives on the importance of language and labels in the context of mass incarceration. We recommend their Words to Use and Avoid Guide.

Incarcerated People, Formerly Incarcerated People

Are just that —we never use terms that would diminish anyone's humanity or agency or minimize the role of the industrial prison complex. We would never use criminals, convicts, felons, ex-cons, prisoners, or anything similar. Instead, use formerly incarcerated, incarcerated, parolee, clemency-seeker, or person in prison.

Security, Surveillance & Targeting

Governments and states use the the veil of protecting national and public safety, including homeland security, by using rhetoric and tactics that often violate the rights of communities of color through hyperpolicing, criminalization, gang databases, and more as part of a coordinated system of oppression.

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

Socioeconomic Status

Houseless or Unhoused, but not necessarily without a home

Use “people without housing” whenever possible. Homeless implies that those currently lacking a residence do not have a place of love and belonging. Also, note that only a fraction of people who meet the federal definition of “homelessness” consider themselves homeless.

Dismantling Class Stigma

“Language—including acquisition, word choice, and accent—is classed behavior and is considered a form of capital that we possess as part of our social class identity.”

While it’s important to be consistent in institutional voice, it’s equally important to allow the specific uniqueness of community members’ voices to lead their stories and writing.

DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES

- a) Use camel case for hashtags: **#AccessibilityMatters**
- b) Provide alt text for images
- c) Use descriptive links that include an action verb and context instead of “click here”
- d) Limit use of emojis, use inclusive skin tones, and consider how an e-reader would interpret their fixed meaning
- e) Use sans-serif fonts for better readability
- f) Ensure sufficient color contrast in visual materials

COMMITMENT TO ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-OPPRESSION COMMUNICATIONS

Begin with Opting-In

When sharing the stories of community members, whether to celebrate them, light a beacon for others, amplify the mission of the Law School, or inspire investment in the work, we follow these steps:

Express Permission to Share

The power of their story is theirs alone; if treated with care and respect, the Law School might amplify it, but the individual gets full information about how and where their story would appear and grants permission in writing. It's important for staff to understand that concerns about privacy and surveillance, not outing any aspect of someone's identity, and trauma are real and very important.

Agreement on the Work

It's important for everyone to understand what the power of a person's story can do for fellow and prospective students, the alumni network, partner organizations, and the mission of the Law School. It's important for the Law School to understand the power dynamic involved with a student or alum or client giving consent to share their story.

Collaboration & Co-authorship

Whenever possible, community members actively help frame their stories themselves. When shaping narratives about groups of people or shared experiences, we should ask ourselves hard questions about how we might be contributing to narratives (e.g. model minority myth; good/bad immigrant dichotomy) and take pains to avoid perpetuating harm and bias.

COMMITMENT TO ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-OPPRESSION COMMUNICATIONS

Champion Truth-Telling

“The way to avoid the problem of having the struggles of individual people or places represent something inherent and immutable is to explicitly point out the systems at work—past and present—that cause them.” - Miriam Axel-Lute

The stories of first-generation students, communities of color, low-income communities, and other communities and people who have been and continue to be marginalized by dominant cultures and perspectives should be told with a truth-telling framework (vs. an asset-based framework or deficit lens).

Avoid posterizing a person, reducing identity to abstraction, or using symbolism in place of people.

Images and symbols are powerful; our visual media works to decentralize dominant perspectives often found in storytelling and photography. Consider photography subjects, the use of iconography or symbols, the literal translation of emojis as read by accessibility readers, the importance of alt text descriptions, and more when asking yourself what narrative you are creating.

There are no “hero” narratives public interest work or social justice advocacy — or in our calls to action.

Our communities have been calling for and doing the work. Whether it’s a campaign to give money or amplify words, we work to resist and dismantle the tendency towards saviorism inherent in the foundations of philanthropy as well as some diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

We avoid the fallacies of “grit” and rugged individualism.

Stories of accomplishment work best when they spell out the support required to overcome system-caused obstacles and challenges and, when appropriate, note why not everyone can access them. No one “succeeds” or “perseveres” (or “fails”) in overcoming centuries and systems of oppression based on effort, will, or luck and to imply as much places the onus to rise above upon the individual rather than taking the systems to task.

COMMITMENT TO ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-OPPRESSION COMMUNICATIONS

Practice Ethical Storytelling

Reframe Language Name it

Name the systems and institutions that are responsible for creating obstacles and the root causes of the issues, problems, and challenges we face.

Avoid or Minimize the Use of Negative Statistics

The (over)use of negative statistics about communities can play into deficit-based narratives and also have grave unintended consequences on individuals and communities. Additionally, we must be sure that the statistics are both accurate and holistic. Source

Words We Avoid or Consider Carefully

empower

Institutions, nonprofits, and leaders often say they “empower” people and communities. But if we believe everyone has agency, autonomy, and equal rights, how can people be given power by any of us when they already have it? Whenever possible, we try to find more accurate, affirming language.

needy

If someone is in a state of need, especially connected to basic rights, resources, and access to the things we all need to survive and thrive, the responsibility of responding to that need is not on the individual alone — which makes an adjective implying they are inaccurate and harmful.

at-risk

This term attaches limitations at the root of an individual’s identity, transferring the need for change to the individual rather than the systems and institutions that should be supporting them. Similarly, sometimes alternatives such as “historically underserved,” “disenfranchised,” and “placed at-risk” are used; while these indicators acknowledge that outside forces have not served the individual or population, they still obscure the problem.

vulnerable

This term implies an assessment of character or fortitude, rather than getting at the truth that “people experience physical, emotional, social, and economic vulnerability when systems and institutions fail to allow access, respond to, or even plan for their existence.”

underserved

Work towards justice and equity shouldn’t imply things are given to people who are waiting on others. When talking about communities or areas, under-resourced can be a more accurate term.

minority

The root of the word denotes “inferior in importance, size, or degree,” which is not how we would want to characterize a person or an element of their identity—especially an element that can have an outsized influence on their life with or without their consent. This term should be reserved for

disparities

Consider that what you might want to get at are inequities — or avoidable, unjust differences — instead. Words that create the context of unjust systems are always more helpful.

COMMITMENT TO ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-OPPRESSION COMMUNICATIONS

Practice Ethical Storytelling (continued)

Embrace Radical Copyediting

The work and commitment expressed by the Radical Copyeditor blog resonate deeply with us:

“Radical copyediting is about helping people use language in ways that increase respect, love, and care for one another. [...] The standards and rules that govern the English language have historically been set down by people with the most power. [...] Thus, when weighing whether to uphold a particular language convention, it’s important to consider why it exists, who benefits from it, and who struggles more because of it.”

We’re here to help share narratives, accomplishments, news and more in ways that affirm our community, help members put their best professional selves forward, and advance the mission and reputation of CUNY Law.

Depending on context and the collaboration at hand, some copyediting might call for formal grammar, other editing might be suggested in the spirit of advancing clarity and comprehension, but all editing includes doing our best to get the most important things right.

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