



Illinois Valley Community College
Writing Center

ELIMINATING PROBLEMATIC LANGUAGE

In academic writing, writers should strive to use inclusive and non-discriminatory language. Whenever possible, avoid using language that could be seen as sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive. Inclusive language invites your readers to hear your ideas, while discriminatory or exclusive language may put readers on the defensive, leading them to reject your thoughts.

AVOIDING SEXIST LANGUAGE

1. Avoid the universal “he” or words like “mankind” to represent all people. Use “he or she/she or he,” plural pronouns, or rewrite the sentence to avoid the reference all together.
Problematic: Mankind has long questioned his relationship to God.
Better: People have long questioned their relationship to God.
2. Avoid stereotyping jobs by sex. Do not assume any certain job is held by a man or a woman. Also, do not announce the sex of a person when it is irrelevant to your point.
Problematic: Fred is a male nurse at the local hospital.
Better: Fred is a nurse at the local hospital.
Avoid using job titles that imply a certain sex must hold a job. Usually, there is a better way to refer to the job.
Problematic: Linda is the chairman of the board, and her husband is a fireman.
Better: Linda is the chairperson of the board, and her husband is a firefighter.
3. Avoid sweeping generalizations about either sex. Use qualifiers to allow for exceptions.
Problematic: Little girls love to read about princesses.
Better: Many little girls love to read about princesses.

AVOIDING RACIST LANGUAGE

1. Only name the race/ethnicity/cultural heritage of a person if somehow especially relevant to your larger point.
Problematic: My Indian stockbroker is a whiz!
Better: My stockbroker is a whiz!
2. Use preferred references for race/ethnicity/cultural heritage. Avoid outdated and racist terms. For example, *African American* or *black* is now preferred over many past terms. Be thoughtful in your word choice and aware that preferences change over time. When necessary, conduct research to determine the proper terminology.
3. Avoid stereotyping people by their country of origin/race/culture, even if it seems like a positive characteristic.
Problematic: Since he’s Chinese, he’s good at math.
Better: Lawrence is good at math.

USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

1. Age: avoid using condescending or derogatory language for any age group. It’s better to say *eighty-year old* than *cute old lady*.
2. Ability and health: use person-first language, which names the person before the disability. Avoid unnecessary focus on disease or disability. It’s better to say *someone with a disability* than *disabled person*. Avoid phrasing like *confined to a wheelchair* or *diabetic girl* in favor of terms like *person who uses a wheelchair* or *girl who has diabetes*.
3. Sexual orientation: Avoid unnecessary focus on sexual orientation. When necessary, use preferred terminology, such as *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, or *cisgender*.
4. Don’t assume your reader shares your personal characteristics. Be careful about using words like *normal* or *different*, which can offend many readers; what is “different” to you may be “normal” to your readers.
5. Avoid stereotypes about any group of people.