Inclusive Language Use

UNE supports the use of inclusive language in the work of both staff and students. Inclusive language is language that is accessible to everyone, is respectful, and acknowledges diversity. Language can impact "a person's identity, wellbeing, and inherent dignity" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024, para. 16); as such, this guide is not intended to replace how individuals and communities use language to identify themselves and their experiences. A key principle of inclusive language is that the context in which it is used matters – differing community, professional, and academic contexts can impact the appropriateness of language and terminology (Digital NSW, 2026). Therefore, it is important to ask people's preferences and seek advice from professional, discipline-specific, or organisational guidance materials where applicable.

This guide provides some general advice on acceptable, inclusive language for:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
2. Gender and sexual diversity
3. Disability and neurodiversity
4. Race, ethnicity and religion
5. Age, location and socioeconomic diversity

Grammar checkers will not pick up inappropriate or discriminatory language. You will need to know the language guidelines for using non-discriminatory language and apply these to your writing.
Note: This guide is only a general recommendation. Please consult disciplinary-specific materials where applicable.
Content warning: The guidance below contains some non-inclusive language that may be offensive. Their inclusion is used to demonstrate how to avoid non-inclusive language.

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

- ✓ Always use capitals when referring to people - for example, Aboriginal peoples, Torres Strait Islanders, First Nations peoples, Elders, Traditional Owners, and for the names of specific Languages (e.g., Wiradjuri, Awabakal) and the geo-cultural communities to which individuals belong (e.g., Koorie, Goorie, Yolngu).
- ✓ Always use capitals for culturally important concepts (e.g., Country, Mob, Language, Elder, Stolen Generations, Dreaming, Acknowledgement of Country, and Welcome to Country).
- ✓ To acknowledge diversity, pluralisation should extend to generalised references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (e.g., 'histories', 'perspectives').
- ✓ Do not abbreviate (e.g. ***Aboriginal***) nor use acronyms (e.g. ***ATSI***).
- ✓ It is inappropriate to use outdated, colonialist, and assimilationist terminology (e.g., ***Aborigine, Indigenous, First Australians***).

2. Gender and sexual diversity

- ✓ Use gender-neutral language that includes and treats men, women, intersex, trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people equally.
  (e.g., Use **parent** instead of ***mother*** or ***father***; use **everyone** or **audience members** instead of binary options such as ***'ladies and gentlemen***,' '***boys and girls***')
- ✓ Use a person's preferred pronouns. If you are not sure, ask the person or use the singular 'they', 'them', or 'their' as this is gender neutral.

- ✓ Use *he, his, him, himself etc.* only when referring specifically to males. Use of the plural 'they' to replace a singular subject.
  (e.g., Each student is responsible for ***his*** library loan - use **their** instead of ***his***)
- ✓ Use titles and modes of address consistently for women, men, and gender-diverse people.
  (e.g., **Ms** in preference to ***Miss/Mrs***, unless the latter is preferred, or **Mx** as a non-binary title)
- ✓ Use neutral terms when describing characteristics in people of different genders (e.g., use **ambitious people** instead of ***'motivated' men, 'domineering' women***)
- ✓ Avoid using occupational titles containing the 'feminine' suffixes -ess, -ette, -trix, -ienne.
  (e.g., use **author** instead of ***authoress***; use **principal** instead of ***headmistress/master***; use **comedian** instead of ***comedienne***)
- ✓ Avoid using gender-specific occupational titles.
  (e.g., use **tradesperson** instead of ***tradesman***; use **executive** instead of ***businessman***; use **artisan** instead of ***craftsman***)
- ✓ Avoid the generic use of man or of composite words involving the syllable 'man'.
  (e.g., use **spokesperson** instead of ***spokesman***; use **humanity** instead of ***mankind***; use **chair** instead of ***chairman***)
- ✓ Avoid using gendered terms or expressions that may be patronising and/or demeaning.
  (e.g., Students should seek assistance from the ***ladies*** in the office - use **staff** instead of ***ladies***)
- ✓ Avoid irrelevant, gratuitous gender and/or sexuality descriptions.
  (e.g., the ***lady [unnecessary]*** editor; the ***female [unnecessary]*** doctor; the ***homosexual [unnecessary]*** minister)
- ✓ Avoid unnecessary references to the relationship and/or parenting status of a person or a group.
  (e.g., Jack Smith ***and his wife [unnecessary]*** and Jane Smith; the ***mother-of-five [unnecessary]*** woman appointed to the position of Minister of Education.)

3. Disability and neurodiversity

- ✓ Respectful use of language can depend on people's preferences when referring to their identities. When possible, always ask a person whether they prefer people-first expressions (e.g., a person with a disability) or identity-first language (e.g., a deaf person) or neuro-affirming language (e.g., an autistic person, a neurotypical person).
- ✓ If you do not know a person or community's preference, use people-first language. People-first language (e.g., person who is deaf, person living with mental illness) focuses on the person, emphasising that a person is more than their characteristics or condition.
- ✓ Only reference a person's disability if it is relevant to the content or the context.
  (e.g., A ***blind [unnecessary]*** musician played the violin at the local concert.)
- ✓ Use specific terminology, and avoid imprecise terms, slang and euphemisms, when describing disability and neurodiversity.
  (e.g., '**schizophrenia**' is a particular type of psychiatric condition, not a general term; '**non-verbal**' and '**dyslexic**' are specific terms compared to euphemisms such as '***special needs***' or '***differently abled***').
- ✓ Use neutral language to avoid reinforcing ableist or negative associations with disability and neurodiversity. (e.g., use terms such as '**characteristics**' and '**experiences**' instead of '***symptoms***' and '***impairments***')
- ✓ Avoid language that objectifies a person, implies limitations, or portrays a person as a victim or sufferer. (e.g., Amir ***suffers*** from ADHD – Amir **has** ADHD; Ethel ***can't*** walk – Ethel **uses** a mobility aid)

4. Race, ethnicity and religion

- ✓ Use the term 'Australian' for all groups of people who live permanently in Australia (Australian Government, 2021).
- ✓ Use neutral terms, such as migrants and immigrants, to refer to people who have recently arrived in Australia. These terms do not refer to a person's cultural identity.

- ✓ Use inclusive terminology when referring to Australians' diverse cultural backgrounds, such as multicultural, multilingual, or multifaith. In professional, academic, and government contexts, terms such as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' or 'English as an additional language' may be used.
- ✓ Only reference a person's or group's heritage, national identity, or cultural identity when relevant. If it is important to specify the descent or ethnicity of a person or group, or to distinguish between people born in Australia and elsewhere, use a qualifier in conjunction with the noun 'Australian' or use hyphenated forms (Australian Government, 2021). (e.g., Vietnamese-born Australian; Jewish Australians; Italo-Australian)
- ✓ Avoid unnecessary references to the ethnic or racial backgrounds of a person or a group.
  (e.g., Some ***Lebanese [unnecessary]*** youths were injured in the accident)
- ✓ Consider context and purpose when using terminology and concepts that refer to specific groups and experiences, such as diaspora, marginalised, or refugee (Australian Government, 2021; Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, n.d.).
- ✓ Avoid language commonly associated with discrimination (e.g., ***aliens***).
- ✓ Naming systems differ from English-speaking countries. Use "given name," "family name," "preferred name" and/or "legal name" instead of "first name," "surname," or "Christian name."

5. Age, location and socioeconomic status

- ✓ Only reference a person's age or age group when relevant. If it is important to specify age, use style conventions consistently. If the age comes before a noun, punctuate with hyphens; use numerals unless the age starts the sentence.
  (e.g., A 72-year-old woman; Twenty-two-year-old Veronica...)
- ✓ Reconsider word choice when discussing age, as some everyday words used to refer to age may carry stigma or subtext, for example, old, young, or elderly. Instead, use person-first language and write about age factually (e.g., people aged 75 years or older; women aged between 45 to 65 years)
- ✓ Avoid unwarranted assumptions about age.
  (e.g., use **aged care facility** instead of ***'old people's home'***; use more suitable terms such as older people, seniors, mature aged instead of ***pensioner, geriatrics***)
- ✓ Avoid terms that denigrate a person or a group on the basis of geographical location.
  (e.g., use people who live in the country instead of ***country hicks***.)
- ✓ Use neutral and factual language to identify and describe geographic location or socio-economic status without stigma. Use person-first language to avoid objectification.
  (e.g. people who rely on the Age Pension instead of ***Pensioners***; people experiencing homelessness instead of ***the homeless***; people living in poverty instead of ***poor people***)
- ✓ Avoid language that is deficit-based.
  (e.g., the family is ***suffering*** experiencing financial hardship - use **experiencing** instead of ***suffering***)
- ✓ Use discipline-specific terminology for economic and geographic factors consistently and appropriately.

Legal requirements

Australia's commitment to inclusiveness is embodied in both federal and state laws. They include the federal *Racial Discriminations Act 1975, Sex Discrimination Act 1984, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986* and *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, as well as the various state Acts relating to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination. Under this legislation, it is generally unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of race, colour, national or ethnic origin, gender, or physical or mental capabilities.

Linguistic discrimination can take various forms that may marginalise or exclude particular segments of the population—whether unwittingly or not. Stereotypical description of any group of people or member of an identifiable group is probably the most insidious. There is no place in public documents for uninformed, prejudiced, or merely insensitive references of this type.

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