How to Avoid Biased Language Using APA Guidelines

The 7th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* has taken the initiative to be more inclusive and avoid biased language when writing about certain populations. The most well-known addition has been the usage of the singular they/them pronoun, but this edition has a dedicated chapter on avoiding bias for several populations and identities. This chapter helps writers be more conscious when describing certain labels or characteristics and helps to improve the clarity and accuracy of their writing.

General Guidelines for Reducing Bias

- Take the time to consider if describing this individual's sexual orientation, disability, or gender identity is relevant to the topic of the paper. For example, if the paper is analyzing a study about elementary school teachers and their teaching methods, would it be relevant to address the gender identities of the teachers?
- When writing about certain characteristics, take care to be conscious of the labels that are used when describing individuals. Try to be as specific as possible when using various labels, such as including an age range when describing someone's age or introducing an individual by their specific identified pronouns.
- Avoid using labels such as "the elderly" or "the disabled" or labels that focus on an individual's condition instead of them as a person. For example, introducing someone as "a person with schizophrenia" instead of "a schizophrenic" is typically preferred as it presents the person as an individual and does not make their disability, medical condition, or age the forefront of their identity.
- Overall, be considerate and sensitive to how individuals are presented.

Age

There are several terms that are appropriate to use when describing the age of an individual. Some examples of these terms are given below.

- 12 years and younger: infant, child, girl, boy
- 13 to 17 years: adolescent, young person, youth, young woman, young man
- 18 years and older: adult, woman, man
- All of these terms may also include self-described non-binary gender categories such as transgender man, agender young woman, or gender-fluid girl.

When writing about older adults, there are some special considerations to take when describing their age.

- Avoid using descriptive terms that isolate older individuals from the general population or suggest possible stereotypes about their abilities due to their age. These terms may include "seniors," "elderly," or "the aged."
- If possible, be specific by using an age range or average age. Otherwise, these terms are preferred: older persons, older individuals, older people, older adults, the older population, persons aged 60 or older.

In this example, the first sentence uses isolating terms for older individuals, while the second sentence implements bias-free terms such as "older individuals" and replaces the term "old age."

The elderly may require more intensive medical care in their old age.

Older individuals may require more intensive medical care as they get older.

Disability

There are two ways to introduce an individual with a disability.

Person-First Language: Person-first language focuses on the individual rather than their disability. They may be introduced as "a person with epilepsy" or "people with schizophrenia."

Identity-First Language: Identity-first language puts an individual's disability as the focus. This is more commonly used as a way for individuals with disabilities to present themselves in their own way, rather than being defined by outside parties.

- Both approaches are fine to use so long as the presented population is being referred to in their preferred way.
- Avoid using terms that are negative in nature, or that are condescending toward disabled individuals. For example, using terms such as "special needs," "physically challenged," or comparing "high-functioning" and "low-functioning" individuals reduces them to their disability.

In this example, the first sentence includes biased language, and the second sentence implements more specific language, such as specifying that the groups of children were from different educational programs, to avoid negative terminology.

Scores between **special needs children** and **normal children** were compared.

Scores between *children with intellectual disabilities in specialized education* and *children in general education* were compared.

Gender

Describing an individual's gender may be relevant and necessary information to analyze certain patterns or characterize certain behaviors. However, it's important to keep in mind the difference between *gender* and *sex* when using these terms. A person's biological sex and gender may not always be the same. When referring to sex assignment, avoid terms such as "birth sex" or "natal sex"; "assigned sex" or "sex assigned at birth" are preferred.

People who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth are considered cisgender. People who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth may be considered transgender, but some may have different terms. These terms may include gender-nonconforming, genderqueer, gender-nonbinary, agender, gender-creative, or two-spirit. To reduce bias, use terms that are specific nouns: transgender man, cisgender women, gender-nonconforming men.

As for pronoun usage, this edition has introduced the use of the singular they/them pronoun.

- If an individual's pronouns are unknown, use the singular "they" to avoid making assumptions about an individual's gender.
- Avoid implying a gender binary by using terms such as "opposite sex" or "opposite gender." Instead, use "another sex" or "another gender."

In the following example, the term "opposite sex" is replaced with another sex as "opposite sex" implies a gender binary. The second sentence also uses the term "cisgender men." This may or may not be applicable and ultimately depends on the information from the source used.

> Some men are self-conscious when meeting the **opposite sex**.
>
> Some *cisgender men* (if applicable) are often self-conscious when first meeting *another sex*.

Sexual Orientation

A person's sexual orientation refers to "a person's sexual and emotional attraction to another person and the behavior and/or socialization that may result from this attraction" (American Psychological Association, 862).

- When describing someone's sexual orientation, use the term "sexual orientation" rather than "sexual preference" or "sexual identity." Language such as "preference" implies that a person's sexual orientation is a choice.
- There are several terms that may be used to describe a person's sexual orientation: heterosexual, lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, asexual, queer, polysexual, or pansexual, among others.

When describing groups of people, the term "LGBT" is considered outdated, and terms such as "LGBTQ," "LGBTQ+," "LGBTQIA," or "LGBTQIA+" are more inclusive. When using these abbreviations, be specific about which groups are being defined. Due to negative connotations, the terms "homosexual" and "homosexuality" are no longer in use. Instead, use identity-first terms to describe individuals, such as a bisexual woman or asexual young man.

In the following example, the first sentence includes the use of the word "homosexuals," which has a negative connotation, so the second sentence includes the terms *lesbian women and gay men* to be more specific and respectful to the participants. If other populations were a part of the study, be sure to include them as well. For more information on writing about the LGBTQ+ population, take a look at the Writing Center's *LGBTQ+ Terminology in Literature: Sexual Orientation* handout.

In a study done by Louise Gunderson (2020), several **homosexuals** described their personal experiences with being stereotyped.

In a study done by Louise Gunderson (2020), several *lesbian women and gay men* described their personal experiences with being stereotyped.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

Due to historical significance and constantly evolving terms, it is important to be sensitive and as specific as possible when describing someone's race or ethnicity. An individual's race refers to their physical characteristics while their ethnicity is more culturally focused and may include language or cultural values.

- Use terms that participants or individuals themselves use to describe themselves.
- When categorizing individuals, be as specific as possible. Instead of using terms such as Asian American, use specific labels such as Chinese American or Korean American when applicable.
- Racial and ethnic terms are proper nouns and should be capitalized. When describing someone who belongs to more than one racial or ethnic group, all of the groups mentioned should be capitalized, but terms such as "biracial" or "multiracial" will not be capitalized.

An individual's racial or ethnic identity may be extremely complex and have many factors that influence how they identify, so keep this in mind when describing this aspect of someone's identity. Be aware of acceptable terms to describe certain populations.

- For example, terms such as "Black" or "African American" may be preferred terms for American people of African ancestry, but using the umbrella term "African American" for people of African descent is not always accurate.
- When describing Indigenous Peoples, avoid outdated or pejorative terms such as "Eskimos." Indigenous People from Alaska may instead identify as "Alaska Natives" or identify with a specific nation. Keep in mind that there are Indigenous People all over the world, and each group has their own preferred terms. When describing these groups, use "people" or "nation" rather than "tribe."
- Avoid using terms such as "minorities" and instead describe non-White racial and ethnic groups with terms such as "people of color" or "underrepresented groups." Using the term "minority" can have negative connotations about being "less than" other populations and may be used incorrectly. If it is necessary to make a distinction between dominant and non-dominant groups, use terms such as "ethnic minority" or "racial minority."

In the following example, the first sentence uses the nonpreferred term "Eskimo." The second sentence includes the term Alaskan Natives and makes the sentence clearer by using Alaskan Natives in place of "most of them." Keep in mind that there may be a more specific term here to describe someone who is an Alaskan Native, such as "Inuit," which is a specific nation.

> While people often think that **Eskimos** live in igloos, most of them use igloos for hunting and live in typical houses.
>
> While people often think that *Alaskan Natives* live in igloos, most *Alaskan Natives* use igloos for hunting and live in typical houses.

Socioeconomic Status

Someone's socioeconomic status does not only include their income, but also social factors such as their education, occupation, and social class. While this can be important information in the context of describing participants in a study, a person's socioeconomic status is complex and should therefore be described carefully to avoid stereotypes or bias.

- When reporting someone's socioeconomic status, provide as much detail as possible. For example, if someone is reported as "low-income," include what factors go into that description.
- Avoid negative terms that may be used when describing someone's socioeconomic status. These terms may include "ghetto," "the homeless," or "the projects." Remember the use of first-person language. For example, when describing the homeless population, using terms such as "people who are homeless" or "people who are suffering from homelessness" instead of "the homeless."

- Terms such as "poorly educated" are overly negative and focus on what people lack, so specific terms such as "people who have not graduated middle school" are preferred.

In the following example, the first sentence uses the term "the homeless" when a better description would be "people who are homeless." Instead of using the term "end up on the streets," using something similar to "their current living situation" is less general and has fewer negative connotations.

> There are many reasons why **the homeless** end up on the streets.
>
> There are many reasons why *people who are homeless* end up in their current living situations.

Activity: Identifying Biased Language

Using the information from this handout, take a look at the examples below and see if you can identify instances of biased language. If you want to further practice implementing bias-free language in your writing, consider what language you may use to "fix" any biased language!

1. It's not accurate to assume that every transgender has the same sexual preference.
2. The homeless often suffer mental illness or alcoholism.
3. The participant was special needs, so the activity had to be modified.
4. I grew up in an area where being an LGBT was not okay.
5. It takes old people forever to cross the street.
6. This study wanted to see if blacks and whites had similar issues with their parents during adolescence.

Answer Key for Activity

1. It's not accurate to assume that every transgender *person* identifies with the same *sexual orientation*.
2. *People who are suffering from homelessness* often suffer from mental illness or alcoholism.
3. The participant of the study *had an intellectual disability,* so the activity was modified.
4. I grew up in an area where being a *part of the LGBTQ+ community* was not okay.
5. *Older individuals* may need more time to cross the street.
6. This study wanted to see if *Black people* and *White people* had similar issues with their parents during adolescence.

References

American Psychological Association. (2019). *Publication Manual of the American*

   Psychological Association (7th ed.). American Psychological Association.