

Writing with Everyone in Mind

Your audience is not just you. Different people from all walks of life will hear what you have to say, especially in diverse areas such as the Bay Area, so a check-in on your communication habits can be helpful.

This check-in is often termed as using “politically correct” language, but this practice of checking in on your communication is more complex than the simple term implies. The tips offered in this handout will help you avoid causing real discomfort or alienation to the people you are communicating with, regardless of the situation.

Nobody is perfect. If you find yourself doing the things that this guide advises against, remember that these are common issues that anyone can work to change.

Do Not Assume Your Audience Is Exactly Like You

One common pitfall is gearing your writing toward other people like you. This problem is something that anyone can find themselves guilty of. As one example, some young men have a tendency to assume their audience consists of other young men. Writing or speaking to one another with endearing terms like “bro” is fine, but be wary of accidentally expecting everyone in your audience to also be a man.

Many activities, workplaces, classrooms, and other spaces have a certain demographic associated with them. In some cases, you may look around the room to see what kinds of people you are speaking to and rely on that to form a better connection with them. However, unless the context allows you to safely assume that *all* members of your audience have something in common, avoid making assumptions about whom you are talking to, which can lead to the use of language that might be inadvertently exclusionary.

Reasoning

Even if the majority of people in a group have some superficial traits in common, talking at them specifically instead of everyone in the room will leave out those you forgot to mention. Keep in mind what every person is hearing.

In fact, unsupportive environments reinforce the sameness of people in these spaces, something which is experienced by minority faculty members across many institutions (Alsulami & Sherwood, 2020). While it is very tempting to be friendly and familiar in particular with people you can relate to, remember how that makes everyone else feel.

Review the following message below and the subsequent discussion about how it makes some problematic assumptions about everyone receiving the message.

Message to SJSU Dance Club

Hey ladies! Everyone did an amazing job this past week at learning the new swing routine. To reward all of your hard work, we will be hosting a potluck and party this Friday at 7:30 PM; make sure you come, and bring your guy too (you'll need a partner after all)!

This message excludes any members of the club who aren't women, and it additionally excludes any members of the club who are not heterosexual women (as well as members who are single).

How Do You Fix It?

It can be tricky to fix this problem in language without it coming off as cold and corporate. Look for opportunities to build a community or find common ground, without dividing your audience based on traits they cannot change.

For the above message, it would be useful for the writer to consider opening the message with the more gender-neutral "Hi everyone!" or even a playful "Howdy!" As for the last portion, you can both simplify the language and remove the assumptions in one go; stating something like "bring a partner if you have one" would fit well here.

Do Not Objectify People with Descriptions

When you describe people, you often use adjectives and labels to clarify who they are. However, it's important to remember that people are people first—not their traits.

People-first language will often use the words "people" or "person" first followed by the descriptor. This language could look like "people who are gay" (instead of "gays"), "adults with disabilities" (instead of "disabled adults"), or "a person with a mental health condition" (instead of "a mentally ill person"). Person-first terms read as additional details about real people, while something like "gays" reads as a collection of things and is thus dehumanizing.

As a side note, in some contexts, the accepted way to name a demographic group *is* to use only the label. For example, in the context of the census, it is common to see "Non-Hispanic Whites" as a way to refer to a specific population of people. These guidelines will vary depending on the subject matter, but do try to use empathetic and specific, people-first language when possible.

Reasoning

This type of language can be objectifying. When you label people by their descriptions, you focus on one part of someone's identity. Furthermore, if that part of their identity is not relevant to the situation at hand, it can be especially harmful. Before using the descriptor, carefully consider if it is relevant in the given situation. If it's not relevant, don't use it.

...According to our findings, females were more likely to engage in this behavior. Females answered positively 45% of the time toward this topic, a significant change from 10 years ago.

Abstracts people away by reducing them to the biological label of "females."

How Do You Fix It?

Consider using the more standard word choice “women,” which is the preferred and most common way to refer to this group of people; “female” is usually seen in the context of biology. Alternatively, you can clarify who they are in addition to being female and use people-first language, as in “students who are female.”

Occasionally, the problem comes from using inappropriate synonyms or tagging on extra words for the sake of sounding academic. Whenever possible, use online resources from advocacy groups or the most recent versions of dictionaries and style guides to determine the best way to refer to certain groups of people.

Avoid Harmful Ideas of “Normal”

It is a natural part of growing up to develop an idea of what is expected from you and what you can expect from the people around you. Based on prior experiences and media messaging, you form an idea of what is typical. You might even possess many of those traits. However, it is dangerous to compare people against an idea of normality. Toxic standards have harmed many demographics, so it is crucial to not perpetuate that cycle in your communication.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are often harmfully labelled as unusual due to dangerous heteronormative standards. This is especially the case for transgender people, who are frequently highlighted as outliers whenever anatomy or gender is discussed. Another example of harmful norms would be the notion of a universal way of thinking. People with ADHD, Asperger's, and other neurological disorders are often left out in conversations about education and must go out of their way to make the school system work for them.

Reasoning

There are many connotations and emotions connected to normality. When your writing uses *normal* or another similar word, remember that now the other options are *abnormal*. It is possible to write content that is applicable to everyone. Everyone experiences life differently and has their own battles to fight. Comparing someone against an invented, unreasonable standard of normality can be damaging to their self-image.

Announcement of Social Event for Gaming Club

Hello SJSU! This weekend, we are hosting a board game night at the beloved Spartan Loft. Located in the attic of the old McKinney Tower, make yourself at home in this cozy location!

If you have a wheelchair or other disability, let us know, as we will have to move the event to another location that is wheelchair accessible.

This message practically shames people with a disability from speaking up out of fear of inconveniencing the event organizers and guests.

How Do You Fix It?

It is your responsibility to make everyone who could participate feel included in the conversation. Try to create content that is applicable to more kinds of people, that celebrates

differences rather than discourages them, and that works for everyone rather than treating a certain group of people as an exception.

This announcement bluntly states that the organizers of this event strongly prefer to keep things as they are and are content with leaving out some students. While there should definitely be changes made to the planning of the event as well, the wording of the announcement can be improved by softening the accessibility notice at the end. Try changing “we will have to move the event” to “we would be happy to update the event location.” Again, it is the responsibility of the organizers to consider who will want to attend this event and address them accordingly.

Conclusion

Over the course of this handout, you have seen several ways that language can be unintentionally harmful to a broader audience. Many of these habits are hard to catch, but the end result will be writing that leaves a better impression on your readers. First, do not focus solely on audience members like you, since this will make everyone else hesitant to connect. Second, avoid dehumanizing people in descriptions and use the most up-to-date language you can. Third, do not compare everyone else to your idea of normal; instead, try to understand different backgrounds.

Activity: Fixing Alienating Language

For the following sentences, try to identify what the issues are, from the perspective of not “writing for everyone.” Then, find a way to address those problems by rephrasing the sentences.

Sentence A: The state of California found that the disabled were more likely to use public transportation services such as VTA.

Sentence B: We want to create resources that will help students with ADHD, giving them the same opportunities for success as regular students.

Sentence C: Did you see a guy posting images yesterday? His art looks really good. Do you know who he is? I only know his username. He must be a new member.

Answer Key for Activity

1. **Sentence A:** Change “the disabled” to something that is more humanizing, such as “people with disabilities.” Consider looking up which term disability activists prefer.
2. **Sentence B:** Change “regular students” to a more appropriate description, one which does not make people with ADHD feel abnormal or alien. One possible change is to say “those without it” instead of “regular students”; another option would be to change the latter half of the sentence to “giving everyone equal opportunities for success.”
3. **Sentence C:** Change gendered words to gender neutral versions, since you have no idea who this person is, and are only guessing they are male based on the other students in the space.

References

Alsulami, S. A., & Sherwood, G. (2020). The experience of culturally diverse faculty in academic environments: A multi-country scoping review. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 44, Article 102777. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102777>