

Language Guidance

Equity, Equality, Diversity and
Inclusion

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directory of social change

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1. How to use this guide

This document is aimed at everyone in the charity sector who would like some suggestions and explanations of inclusive language. DSC has developed it from our own internal standards for inclusive language because we feel it could be useful for others. However, it is not meant to be prescriptive because what makes language ex/inclusive depends a lot on context, and there will be ongoing debate and disagreement over the use of some terms. We also recognise that this document is not exhaustive or comprehensive; it is important to look at multiple resources, of which we have listed some at the end of this resource. However, we think it is important to provide a free EEDI resource that exemplifies how we at DSC use our language to be inclusive.

It is worth noting that DSC's past materials and resources may not be up to date with this current guidance. Rather than rush to correct or hide this, we think it is important to be honest and show that as an organisation we have been reflecting on how we use language and that we have worked to become more inclusive.

For ease, we have separated characteristics (such as age, disability and gender); there is one characteristic per page in alphabetical order. Please refer to the Contents page to locate the area in which you would like advice. There is also a section on what to do if you make a language mistake. You can find this on page 14.

The sections to follow are structured as follows:

Language to avoid

This subsection provides examples of language to avoid.

Language suggestions

This subsection provides examples of alternative, more appropriate language to consider using.

Explanation

This column provides additional information to contextualise the preference or rejection of terms. It provides understanding of why we at DSC have decided to avoid certain terms and have embraced alternative terms.

Examples

This column provides examples of using the suggested language in practice.

2. General advice

Before we look at the individual sections, it is important to go over some general advice. It is difficult to generalise as often the correct use of language depends on context. There is no single 'solution' to every situation. However, there are some examples and suggestions that we have listed throughout this document. These should help to make clearer the types of language that can be either exclusionary or inclusive.

It is important to remember that language evolves over time. The key thing is to be open to learning and continual improvement. For this reason, this will not be the one and only language guide that DSC produces. We will review and reflect periodically. We welcome external suggestions from you too.

As a rule of thumb, we may consider:

- Asking people directly for their preferences / how they describe themselves. If you are unsure, you may wish to speak with them to understand how they identify. For example, at the start of an external-facing meeting you may wish to ask people to introduce themselves and their pronouns if they feel comfortable doing so. Similarly, if you do not know how to pronounce a name you might check with the relevant individual.
- Use of plain English to ensure that content is accessible for all. If you use specific terms, it is important to provide short definitions.
- Avoiding umbrella/broad labels. Labels like 'BAME' or 'LGBTQ+' group diverse identities together, which can be useful for describing shared experiences and fostering solidarity. However, it is better to be as specific as possible because there are unique experiences and outcomes within these umbrellas. It is important to remember that labels do not represent our vast array of experiences and lives, which are shaped by various intersecting factors.
- Avoiding exceptionalist language. Otherwise known as 'model minority', this elevates a member of a group to a superior position because they 'defy' a negative stereotype associated with said group. For example, telling Black people that they are 'well spoken' is not a compliment! Rather, it is a racist comment that implies that Black people are typically inarticulate.
- [Avoiding paternalistic language](#). Paternalism involves people or a group assuming authority over individuals or groups deemed incapable of making their own decisions, under the guise of looking after their welfare. This maintains unequal power structures and reduces autonomy. Phrases like 'lift people out of poverty' and 'teach a man to fish...' are some examples.

3. About Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

We have based the following definitions of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) on [how Acas defines EDI](#):

- Equality means that we all have the same opportunities. In an equal society/workplace, we are all treated the same, no matter our differences with one another.
- Diversity describes how varied and different our community/workplace are. Attitude-wise, a diverse community/workplace consciously celebrates and respects differences within it.
- Inclusion means feeling like we belong in our community/workplace, and that we are valued and respected.

At DSC, we incorporate **equity** (EEDI). In addition to equality's levelling of our playing field, equity looks to equalise our **outcomes**. Equity recognises that we do not live in an equal society. It consciously seeks to address these injustices by removing barriers that people who experience marginalisation and discrimination face that diminishes their equality of opportunities.

We strive to provide a welcoming environment and be a welcoming organisation. We aim for, and want, all our publications, resources and services to reflect the diverse communities which make up the UK.

This guidance is adapted from DSC's Publications team's internal *Editorial Manual*. This manual does a great job at advising our editors and writers on how to use language to be respectful. It was written because we believe that the charity sector has a duty to use its language inclusively, especially as it works with and for beneficiaries that are often seen as the most vulnerable in society. Since it was written, our internal Wellbeing and EEDI working group has been working on 'formalising' the organisation's existing attitude towards EEDI by producing this external resource.

DSC will periodically review this document because we recognise that how we use and interpret language changes over time.

4. Language about age

Language to avoid

Seniors, the elderly, old people, the aged, the third age **vs** youths, young people

Boomers, generation X, millennials

Language suggestions

Older people, older adults **and** younger people, children

People aged between x and x, people born in x/between x and x

Explanation

Where possible, consider specifying the age group or birth years because this avoids the use of socially constructed terms to which harmful stereotypes are linked.

'Old' and 'young' are absolute and binary terms. They are harmful because there is no agreement on what constitutes 'old' or 'young'. This is why 'older' and 'younger' are preferred. The latter are comparative and imply a spectrum of age. Age is fluid as it changes as we live!

Please note that some cultures/societies will have different understandings and definitions of age. For instance, Native American communities refer to members as 'Elders' if they are seen as a source of traditional wisdom.

Examples

'This trust makes grants to individuals who are aged over 70.'

'This charity supports younger people that were born between 2005 and 2007.'

5. Language about disability and illness

Language to avoid

To suffer (with)
The disabled, differently abled **vs** able-bodied, normal
Offensive and outdated ableist terms
Confined/bound to a wheelchair
People who **are** special needs
The blind / the visually impaired, the deaf / the hard of hearing

Language suggestions

To experience / have a / live with [specific condition/impairment]
People who require [describe specific support] / assistive technology / mobility aid(s)
People who **have** access needs / special educational needs
'Wheelchair user'
People with visual impairments, visually impaired people / people with hearing impairments, deaf people

Explanation

At DSC, we have been, and still are, discussing which term is better to describe disability. Organisations may use 'people with disabilities' to put the individual first, to centre them as the subject. Other organisations may use 'disabled people' because this implies that people with impairments experience disability due to the inaccessibility of society; this is called the social model. Either option is acceptable, though DSC prefers to use the identity-first model ('people with disabilities'). Another good alternative is 'people with impairments' as this aligns with the social model of disability. Impairments are turned into disabilities through societal obstacles. Of course, these are umbrella terms. It is always better to be specific or quote how people describe themselves directly.

There are culturally distinct groups of people living with disabilities. For instance, 'Deaf' (capital 'd') is used when referring to a specific community of people who are deaf. Though, do not assume that everyone who is deaf identifies as part of the Deaf community.

We all have needs. It is important to talk about needs as something we receive rather than something that we are. Though, it is appropriate to refer to 'special educational needs' (SEN).

Avoid reducing people to a single attribute, or comparative terms that imply people with disabilities are not the 'norm'.

Examples

'The charity awards grants to people living in Wales who experience seizures.'
'One of our trustees is part of the Deaf community.'
'The charity also helps family members who do not have a visual impairment.'
'At our charity, we advocate for the rights of disabled people.'

Please note that we suggest to use the term 'carer' as it is a recognised legal term in the UK under the Care Act 2014. A 'carer' is someone who provides or intends to provide care for another adult.

6. Language about gender

Language to avoid

Using 'female' as an adjective, e.g. 'female CEO'

Using male pronouns and subjects as the default, e.g. 'the applicant should submit his application'

Using the identities 'transsexual' and 'transgender' interchangeably

'Hey guys!'

Victim/survivor of sexual harassment

Prostitute

Language suggestions

Titles without gender qualification

Using 'they' / 'them' as a default

'Hey everyone!' Etc.

People/men/women who have experienced sexual harassment

Sex worker

Explanation

It is important to use gender neutral language, which helps to reject the idea that the male / masculine is superior and the default.

'They' / 'them' are useful if you do not know how someone identifies. These pronouns help us talk about others before we get to know them and how they like to identify. See the next slide for **more on pronouns**.

'Hey guys!' is not gender neutral so it may alienate people. Consider alternatives like 'Hey everyone / people / folks / team!'

The term 'transgender' is an umbrella term, under which fits 'transsexual'. The latter is a specific term that should only be used if someone identifies as transsexual themselves because its use can marginalise trans people.

As always, it is best to use the terms or language that individuals use to describe themselves. Talk to the people around you to learn about their identities.

Please note that whilst we should use gender neutral language, we do not want to obscure the reality that society is systemically misogynistic and gender critical. It is appropriate to use gender-specific language when discussing issues like the lack of women CEOs or pay inequality between men and women.

Examples

'I would like to apply for the role as chair(person).'

'She is ~~female~~ CEO of our organisation.'

'The applicant should submit ~~his/her~~ **their** application form by the end of the year.'

'A case worker may support people who have experienced sexual harassment.'

7. Guide to pronouns

How do they identify?	Pronouns	Comments
As a woman	She/her/hers	Femininity can present in a variety of ways.
As a man	He/him/his	Masculinity can present in a variety of ways.
Under the nonbinary umbrella	They/them/theirs	We use these pronouns when the person is unknown. Let's say you're the last one to leave the train. You see an umbrella on a seat. You might say: “Oh, someone left their umbrella here. I'll set it aside for them, I bet they are looking everywhere!” You can use the same construction when referring to non-binary people.
Some people use a combination of pronouns to describe their identity, for example she/they or they/him. In this case, ask how they would prefer you to talk about them. For more information about pronouns check out Stonewall's guide.		

8. Language about international development

Language to avoid

First/second/third world countries

Developing/developed countries

Illegal immigrant, alien, foreigner

Language suggestions

High/middle/low-income countries

Economically/industrially developing countries

Global South/North, Global Majority countries

People who are undocumented/non-registered,
people seeking asylum, people fleeing from
war/violence

Explanation

Consider rejecting outdated methods of categorising countries. Terms such as 'first/third world' and 'developing countries' perpetuate colonial attitudes. 'Economically/industrially developing countries' is preferable because it limits meaning to GDP rather than implied cultural differences, much like 'x-income countries'.

Please note that 'Global South/Global North' are geopolitical terms (i.e., Australia is part of the Global North but is geographically in the Southern Hemisphere) that denote relations of power and influence.

Continents such as Africa and Asia are large and diverse so, where possible, please be more specific. Internationally operating charities may have specific programmes for specific regions/countries.

Try to avoid implying that Global Majority people are inherently helpless and vulnerable, without their own agency.

Examples

'The charity works with partners in low-income countries.'

'We are running projects in partnership with local NGOs in Sub-Saharan Africa.'

'Our education programme provides conversational English practice for people seeking asylum.'

'In-kind donations of clothes have been made across Helmand Province, Afghanistan.'

'That organisation is anti-colonial and engages with communities across the Global South.'

Please note that we suggest to use the term 'West Asia' or name specific countries instead of 'Middle East'.

9. Language about race and ethnicity

Language to avoid

Coloured people

No capitalisation of racialised communities, e.g. 'black community', 'south Asian women'

Ethnically diverse people, ethnic minorities

Using 'race' and 'ethnicity' interchangeably

Language suggestions

Capitalise racialised communities, e.g. 'The Black community', 'South Asian women'

People of the Global Majority

Racialised communities, people of colour

Explanation

We recommend capitalising terms denoting race in the same way that you would for 'Deaf community'.

Note that the term 'BAME' is increasingly unpopular. There is no accepted consensus on an alternative umbrella term, but the term 'people of the Global Majority' is becoming more popular. 'Ethnic minorities' is only used when referring to people of the Global Majority; however, **we all have ethnicity** (not just people of colour)!

DSC has in the past used the term BAME but has since moved away from this term and prefers more specific language. However, it may be necessary to quote the term when referring to organisations that continue to use it.

Race and ethnicity are distinct; race refers more to physical traits and ethnicity to a shared cultural identity. It is worth noting that some sociologists see racial classifications as political categories that have been used to justify discrimination and power imbalances.

Where possible, we recommend being specific in your language use as using collective terms obscures unique experiences that different racialised groups will have.

Examples

'The charity awards grants to Black and South Asian Women residing in Camden.'

'We offer a fast-track scheme for people of the Global Majority.'

10. Language about religion

Language to avoid

Muslim country, Christian country etc.

Blanket terms like 'Christian' when referring to denominations that have been specified

Using 'faith', 'religion', 'belief' interchangeably

Language suggestions

Muslim-majority country, Christian-majority country etc.

Use denomination names if they are known, and capitalise religion names, names of holy texts or religious holidays

Explanation

Religion can overlap with ethnicity, but assumptions about religion should not be made based on ethnicity and vice versa. For example, not all people who identify as ethnically Jewish practise the religion of Judaism.

The same can be said for nationality, not all people who live in Muslim-majority countries will practise Islam.

Remember that each religion has various sects, denominations or groups that practise their religion differently. For example, if an organisation is a Methodist or Catholic charity, it is better to be specific rather than to use the term 'Christian'.

The terms 'faith', 'religion' and 'belief' often have personal meanings for different people and are not interchangeable. Many people hold beliefs without belonging to an organised religion.

If you are unsure when writing about religious organisations, it is best to follow the example of the organisation and use the language that it uses.

Examples

'Applications are open to Methodist organisations in Merseyside.'

'Our education projects are based in Muslim-majority countries.'

11. Language about sexuality

Language to avoid

Sexual preference

LGBTQ+ person

Bisexuals, gays

Language suggestions

Sexual orientation

A member of the LGBTQ+ community or be specific about their sexual orientation

Bisexual people, gay people etc.

Explanation

We suggest using terms related to sexual orientation as adjectives rather than nouns. For example, 'bisexual people' rather than 'bisexuals' is preferred.

Some terms may hold different weight for different members of the LGBTQ+ community. The term 'queer' or 'queer communities' for example may be seen by some as an acceptable term, but for others it may still hold the older sense of the word as a slur.

Variations of the acronym used to describe non-heterosexual groups exist. DSC uses 'LGBTQ+' because this recognises that there are many forms sexual orientation that are not covered by 'LGBTQ'. Many organisations will use 'LGBT+', 'LGBTQ', 'LGBT' or in some cases 'LGBTQIA'. However, it is better to avoid using these acronyms if you are only talking about gender identity, as issues that concern the Trans community tend to be more specific than conversations about the wider LGBTQ+ community. In this case, we use the term 'trans people'.

Examples

'The charity provides support and information for members of the LGBTQ+ community.'

'Sexual orientation is a spectrum.'

12. Language about social and economic circumstances

Language to avoid

Vulnerable/needy people
Poor people, poor communities, people on benefits
Homeless people
Ex-offender/ex-criminal/ex-convict

Language suggestions

People made vulnerable/disadvantaged by, people in need
People on a low income, people experiencing poverty, low-income communities, people receiving statutory support/welfare
People experiencing homelessness
People who have offended/been incarcerated, people in prison, people affected by the criminal justice system

Explanation

This is an area where we may fall into using paternalistic or dehumanising language. It is important to highlight that these kinds of circumstances are an experience rather than an identity. It is also important to highlight that our socio-economic circumstances are a result of external factors.

‘People in need’ should be used when referring to larger groups that have disparate needs. When speaking about groups that are experiencing the same or similar difficulties, it is better to be specific to what those needs are. At DSC, we have a funding guide called *‘The Guide to Individuals in Need’*. It covers a wide range of different circumstances that may require an individual to seek support.

When discussing criminality, please be aware of making a distinction between committing an offence and being incarcerated. ‘People affected by the criminal justice system’ is a broader term but may be acceptable, comparatively to .

Examples

‘The organisation provides support for people experiencing homelessness in low-income communities.’
‘Our platform promotes the voices of women who have been incarcerated, often due to committing petty offences arising from experiencing absolute poverty.’

13. Addressing mistakes

What to do if you make a mistake

In circumstances where someone makes you or another colleague aware that you/they have said/written something that is exclusive and/or disrespectful, we need to approach it using a growth mindset. We make EEDI progress through making mistakes.

At DSC, we thought it might be useful to refer to the Centre for Equity, Gender and Leadership's advice for how to address instances where you have mistakenly used exclusive language. Their guide titled [Understanding Inclusive Language: A Framework](#) recommends that you:

- **Acknowledge the mistake you made and the harm or offence it caused.** Let the person who was harmed know that it was not acceptable
- **Explain what happened without excusing it.** Let the other person know that you've identified what went wrong and the negative impact it had
- **Express your remorse**
- **Offer to make amends**

Remember, the only way we can progress in our EEDI journey is through constructive conversations and learning from genuine mistakes. As mentioned in 'About Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', DSC will likely review this language guidance regularly, once a year.

14. Further reading and resources

Here are the organisations whose resources we referred to in the development of our language guidance. If you are ever unsure of how to word something inclusively, it is a good idea to check multiple sources as there is never one right solution.

- Edge Hill University provides an excellent overview of inclusive language specifically relating to the [LGBTQ community](#)
- Greater Manchester Equality Alliance produced guidance about [language related to age](#) to help its members and colleagues be respectful
- Migrants' Rights Network, as an organisation led by a team that includes people of the Global Majority and which advocates for migrants' rights, is an excellent resource for [how to talk about immigration](#)
- Oxfam's [excellent language guide](#) covers a variety of different characteristics and is easy to read. It is especially good for those of us who work with and for people experiencing poverty, including in the Global South
- Scope, the disability equality charity, has a resource for [disability inclusive language in a workplace environment](#)
- The Law Society's website has an [essential guide to language relating to race and ethnicity](#). It distinguishes between ethnicity and race and relates the use of language to the Equality Act 2010
- The University of Bristol, like Oxfam, [provides an overview of protected characteristics](#) and is geared towards staff looking to make their writing not only inclusive but also accessible

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding language guidance, please contact cs@dsc.org.uk or research@dsc.org.uk

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