Exhibition Language Guidelines: A Working Document for Academic Library Exhibit Professionals

Abstract: Libraries' exhibitions should be equitable, diverse, and inclusive, and the writing in them should reflect and contribute to this. Authors inevitably have biases and may have blind spots when writing about topics culturally different from their own backgrounds and identities. Authors also may find it difficult to balance their attention to sensitivity with the consistency, concision, and clarity that exhibit writing requires. Additionally, because exhibit writing is read by a diverse audience, different audience members will bring different sensitivities to that aspect of the exhibit experience. Building upon and compiling material from efforts in conscious editing and ethical description, this document is intended to provide a guideline for writing with sensitivity and topical specificity about gender identity and sexual orientation; disability; social class and socioeconomic status; race, ethnicity, and nationality; age; and religion and spirituality. This document also connects writers with some definitive, current resources for each of these topical areas.

Introduction to This Guide

The development of this guide is problematic for exactly the reason that this guide is needed—identity-based bias exists in writing and in language. Therefore, we hope to be as transparent as possible about who and what this guide is for, how we developed it, and who we—as authors, editors, and reviewers—are.

Who Is This Guide For?

These writing guidelines are meant to be used by anyone working on library exhibits (or any exhibit really), including library staff, campus and community collaborators, and student members of exhibit teams. In all of these categories, location and cultural norms can affect language. These guidelines are intended for authors working in North America and writing in American English.

Writing is a fundamental aspect of exhibit work, so its consideration is particularly important. Our exhibits typically consist of media (photography, video/film, physical objects, etc.) and text that describes those media and frames them within cultural and historical contexts. We are often writing about historical periods, places, and cultures outside of our own personal experience and expertise, and media and materials with insensitive content or of problematic provenance.

We welcome diversity in our exhibitions and encourage our curators to include a broad spectrum of ideas on any exhibit topic that might not necessarily be in their area of expertise. Curators should always consult subject experts where needed. We hope this guide lowers barriers for curators and helps them consider making exhibits more inclusive of objects, images, manuscripts, and ideas outside their known expertise. Ultimately, we hope writing inclusively also lowers barriers to exhibitions for visitors from the marginalized groups represented.

For example, an exhibit on the history of a student organization at a university might include photographs and artifacts from people in every category listed in this manual. Some areas might be well-known to the curators, some may not. This guide is a reference source for how to consider the language used in describing these subjects. Diversity is complicated and not monolithic; we have shared resources used to write these guidelines, and we encourage further research by curators. We hope this guide is a thoughtful way to consider diversity issues with the understanding that there is almost never a "right answer," just one that has been chosen after consideration and contextualization of the exhibit itself.

What Is This Guide For?

These aspects of exhibit work present many opportunities for insensitivities and mistakes in our writing and, indeed, they occur. These guidelines are meant to

- help clarify language standards for exhibit teams to write about topics concerning gender, disability, social class and socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and religion and spirituality;
- offer background information with respect to these identity categories and their sensitivities, and writing and editing best practices that draw upon that context; and
- point to the most definitive and relevant third-party references and resources to support equitable and inclusive writing.

We are typically writing and editing collaboratively and often have faculty and student writers on our exhibit teams. We are also using and quoting source texts. Our writing will be read as coming from our institution, not from an individual author, and we want to have an awareness about the kind of authority the work product of an institution carries.

As a community of library exhibit professionals, we acknowledge that academia and academic libraries historically have not been diverse spaces and that librarianship—including the development of collections and the curation and preparation of exhibits—frequently has been done from a white, heteronormative perspective. In the context of wider cultural and academic efforts toward equity, diversity, and inclusion, we are examining every aspect of our work through an equity lens.

Following the lead of archivists and catalogers in academic libraries, this guide aims to align exhibition writing with the practice of conscious editing. Conscious editing is an ethos of care employed in the development, composition, and ongoing refinement of texts and nontextual presentations of information. The aim is to create and continuously refine texts with language that is plain, direct, nuanced, honest, and humane; to frame and reframe narratives with a critical awareness of inherent bias; and to center and recenter discourse to be inclusive of those who have been marginalized, erased, or silenced in the historical records.

Basic Principles to Follow

- Language, and what is considered appropriate, is constantly evolving. As much as possible, use the terms that people use to self-identify. Keep in mind that identity groups are not homogenous. Consult recommended style guides for accepted language.
- Collaborate and consult with relevant community members when planning and curating exhibitions. Initiate these relationships as early as possible in your process in order to be respectful of your partners' time and to allow for thoughtful feedback.
- Be careful not to stereotype.
- Explain the use of historical terms (placed in quotation marks or used when quoting a historical figure) and language choices through a "Note on Language."
- Consider carefully when it is necessary to identify race, gender, disabilities, religion, socioeconomic status. Is identity an important part of the story?
- Usually, person-first language is best.
- Inform visitors about material that could be considered offensive or harmful by including a content warning at the entrance to the exhibition and sometimes next to individual exhibits as well.

How Did We Develop This Guide?

This document is not as much our original writing as it is a compilation and collation of content drawn from many sources (and cited/linked in the text). We have tried to take a survey of contemporary standards in each topical category and then distill that content into a relevant, usable guideline for library exhibit writing. This remains, necessarily, an open, working document.

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NOTE: While it was essential that our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color/lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, or gender nonconforming (BIPOC/LGBTQ+) colleagues review and contribute to this document, our intention was to avoid burdening them with the labor associated with educating exhibit producers on how to responsibly depict their marginalized communities.

Reviewers

- NC State University Libraries Equity Diversity Inclusion Committee
- NC State University Libraries Advisory Group to DeEtta Jones and Associates
- UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries Conscious Editing Steering Committee
- UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries IDEA Council

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

The following definitions are drawn from the [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#):

We use the acronym LGBT to describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. The first three letters (LGB) refer to sexual orientation. The "T" refers to issues of gender identity.

Sexual orientation describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic, and/ or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual orientations.

Gender identity describes a person's internal, deeply held sense of their gender.Identities typically fall into binary (e.g., man, woman) nonbinary (e.g., genderqueer, genderfluid), or ungendered (e.g., agender, genderless) categories.For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

LGBTQ: When Q is seen at the end of LGBT, it typically means queer and, less often, questioning.Some LGBT people use queer, or more commonly genderqueer, to describe their gender identity. Queer is not just shorthand for *LGBT* but also the full range of human sexuality. Typically, for those who identify as queer, the terms *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* are perceived to be too limiting and/or fraught with cultural connotations they feel don't apply to them.Once considered a pejorative term used to humiliate and degrade all persons assumed not to conform to Western society's sexuality and gender norms, some LGBT people have reclaimed queer to describe themselves; however, it is not a universally accepted term, even within the LGBT community.

When writing for an exhibit audience, use both gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language. These have some overlap but are not the same thing.

For some people, the relationship between gender, biology, and identity is certain—even to the point that they're equivalent; for other people, these relationships are fluid. This difference can produce bias in language around gender. To a cisgender person who identifies their gender with the sex assigned to them at birth, biology and identity may seem to be the same, inseparable

thing. To a transgender or nonbinary person whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth, language that treats cisgender as normative may be seen as biased because it marginalizes or outright rejects the idea of a difference between biological or birth sex and gender identity. *Gender-inclusive language* is a writer's objective here.

The second kind of gender bias in language has to do with sexism inherent in usage. This includes now-outdated conventions (referring to a woman through a husband's name: "Mrs. John Powell"), male-centric words and terms (*mankind* and *salesman*), or the usage of male-default pronouns as in a sentence like, "When a doctor arrives at surgery, he scrubs his hands thoroughly." *Gender-neutral language* is a writer's objective here.

While gender-inclusive language and gender-neutral language are not the same, they share the same ultimate objective: to treat all people with respect and equity in writing.

Gender-Inclusive Language

We must avoid the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and cisgender and that these identities are more *normal* or superior compared with other sexualities and gender identities. Gender-exclusive bias marginalizes LGBTQ individuals and communities. The basic idea in writing without bias is to use the terminology that an individual or community prefers writers to use for them. Different individuals, communities, and organizations have different standards about terminology. Words can be repurposed and reinterpreted by some to be used in a positive light, whereas others still see these words as harmful and pejorative. Make your best effort to know the preferences of the people you are writing about, which may include slang and colloquial terms, and be open and willing to make changes if you are corrected later. Also, be sensitive to insulting subtleties in language that imply that gender identity is a mere preference or lifestyle.

Discrimination led, and still leads, LGBTQ people to self-censor and hide their sexual orientation and gender identity. Many histories and life experiences of LGBTQ people have been erased or are hidden within the historical record as a result. To make more accurate determinations about the gender identity or sexual orientation of people in historical records, we must thoroughly research all the contextual details. There are clues in the language used in the past that can help us to unearth LGBTQ histories, such as the euphemistic terms *lifelong companion* or *friend* used in place of labels such as gay or lesbian partner. When writing about the gender identity and sexual orientation of people who belonged to other time periods and cultures, we must be careful not to impose contemporary cultural norms and understandings. Equally, when using historical terms in exhibition text, it is important to identify them as such and to provide historical context.

LGBTQ Glossary of Terms

There are numerous LGBTQ glossaries online, but the GLAAD Media Reference Guide appears to be the most definitive. Some of the definitions contain usage guidelines, and GLADD provides a devoted transgender glossary as well. It's important to remember that the meanings and cultural values of some of these terms are in flux or may vary across generations and different communities. If you are uncertain about a specific term's usage, it is advisable to consult with

someone who would be knowledgeable enough to give you guidance, including instructors and researchers in gender studies and centers/offices on your campus with staff who are paid to field these questions.

Some of the GLAAD glossary entries that you might find most useful are sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, gay, lesbian, bi/bisexual, trans, transgender, transsexual, cisgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary and/or genderqueer, queer, LGBTQ, intersex, asexual.

Preferred Terminology

Here are some common terminology do's and don'ts, again culled from the GLAAD Media Reference Guide, which explicates these preferences fully.

Do Not Use	Use Instead
homosexual (n. or adj.)	gay (adj.), gay man or lesbian (n.), gay person/people
homosexual relations/relationship, homosexual couple, homosexual sex, etc.	relationship, couple (or, if necessary, gay/lesbian/same-sex couple), sex, etc.
sexual preference	sexual orientation or orientation
gay lifestyle, homosexual lifestyle, or transgender lifestyle	LGBTQ people and their lives
transgenders, a transgender	transgender people, a transgender person
sex change, preoperative, postoperative	transition
biologically male, biologically female, genetically male, genetically female, born a man, born a woman	assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth or designated male at birth, designated female at birth

Gender-Inclusive Pronouns

Although it seems like a recent issue, gender-inclusive and gender-neutral pronouns in English have been debated and sought after since at least the 1700s[1]. Here are some examples of contemporary, gender-inclusive pronouns (adapted from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Gender Pronouns Guide):

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[1] [Gender Pronouns Guide from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee LGBTQ+ Resource Center](#)

- **They/Them/Theirs.** "Shea ate their food because they were hungry." This is a common gender-neutral pronoun, and it can be used in the singular. In fact, "they" was voted as the Word of the Year in 2015.
- **Ze/Hir/Hir.** "Tyler ate hir food because ze was hungry." *Ze* is pronounced like *zee* and can also be spelled "zie" or "xe." *Ze* replaces "she/he/they." *Hir* is pronounced like *here* and replaces "her/hers/him/his/they/theirs."
- **Just My Name Please!** "Ash ate Ash's food because Ash was hungry." Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all, using their name as a pronoun instead.

Pronoun Usage for Specific People

If you are writing about a specific living person whom you can be in contact with, ask them what their preferred pronouns are. It is important not to assume someone's pronouns based on how they look, dress, or act.

If you are writing about a specific dead person or a living person you are not able to contact, then look at other writing about them to see what pronouns have been previously used, making sure to not simply perpetuate misgendering someone. If such references are unavailable, then draw upon other cues, such as a photograph or their name to see if you can make a reasonably confident presumption about their pronouns. Lacking this confidence, default to they/them.

Gender-Neutrality and Pronouns

The practice of using masculine pronouns (*he*, *his, him*) as the default is outdated and biased. There are a variety of ways to neutralize them depending on their situation in your prose. Some of these ways overlap with gender-inclusive pronoun practices.

Make Nouns/Pronouns Plural. If it works for your prose, pluralize your noun forms. So, "A *student* who loses too much sleep may have trouble focusing during *his or her* exams" becomes, "*Students* who lose too much sleep may have trouble focusing during *their* exams."

Use *They* as a Singular Pronoun. Usually the word *they* refers to a plural antecedent. But using *they* as singular has become common. "Look for the driver at baggage claim; *they* will be holding a sign with your name on it" is preferable to "*he or she* will be holding a sign."

Avoid Using a Pronoun. Often, pronouns are used in prose to avoid repeating a noun. If the prose bears it, use the noun: "The poets gathered in the auditorium," instead of, "They gathered in the auditorium."

Usage of Other Gendered Nouns

Some trans communities object to the terms *man* and *woman* (especially when they are unmodified by identifiers like *cisgender* or *transgender*) because they find them bimodally normative and exclusionary of a wider range of gender identities. Use general language like *man*

and *woman* when writing about general topics and more specific language like *cisgender woman* or *transgender man* where relevant to the subject at hand.

Gender-Neutral Language

Sexist constructions that default to the masculine are common in English. *Man* and words ending in *-man* are easy to spot and replace with neutral language, even in contexts where many readers strongly expect the gendered noun. Instead of writing, "The mailman visited in the afternoons," you can write, "The mail was delivered in the afternoons," or "The mail carrier visited in the afternoons." When quoting material with masculine constructions, an explanation or disclaimer is not necessary but may be relevant depending on the subject, context, or egregiousness of the language.

Another example of gendered language is the way the titles *Mr., Miss*, and *Mrs.* are used. Mr. can refer to any man, regardless of whether he is single or married, but Miss and Mrs. define women by whether they are married, which until quite recently meant defining them by their relationships with men. A simple alternative when addressing or referring to a woman is *Ms.* (which doesn't indicate marital status). In addition, some are in the habit of addressing most women older than them, particularly teachers, as Mrs., regardless of whether the woman in question is married. A simple alternative when addressing or referring to a woman is Ms. (which doesn't indicate marital status). Individuals have varying and personal preferences when it comes to their titles; don't make assumptions. If the term applies, *Professor* or *Dr.* should be used. If a title cannot be verified, Ms. is a good general default.

The North Carolina Digital Heritage Center (DigitalNC.com) provides [image description guidance](#) for reducing subjective decision-making and implicit bias when identifying gender in photographs when there is no information about the self-identification or preferred labels of the people represented. They recommend the use of gender-neutral terms, such as using *adults* instead of man or woman and *child(ren)* over boy or girl. Other alternatives are *people* or *individuals*, or gender-neutral terms based on context, like *diners*, *workers*, or *students*.

Particularly Useful Resources

The GLAAD Media Reference Guide provides a definitive glossary of [lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer terminology](#) and [transgender terminology](#), each including usage examples, terms to avoid, and offensive terms.

This [American Psychological Association (APA) guide (PDF)](#) has thorough guidelines about eliminating sexist bias in writing.

The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill has also compiled a thorough [writing guide on gender-inclusive language](#) that goes into useful detail about the balance between usage, inclusivity, neutrality, and good prose. The general pronoun guidelines provided earlier are comprehensively laid out, and a section on gendered words like policeman and expressions like man-made is particularly good. The guide concludes with the following checklist.

Checklist for Gender-Related Revisions

As you review your writing, consider the following questions:

1. Have you used *man* or *men* or words containing them to refer to people who may not be men?
2. Have you used *he*, *him*, *his*, or *himself* to refer to people who may not be men?
3. If you have mentioned someone's sex or gender, was it necessary to do so?
4. Do you use any occupational (or other) stereotypes?
5. Do you provide the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people of different genders?

Perhaps the best test for gender-inclusive language is to imagine a diverse group of people reading your paper. Would each reader feel respected? Envisioning your audience is a critical skill in every writing context, and revising with a focus on gendered language is a perfect opportunity to practice.

Other Resources

- Human Rights Campaign glossary of terms
- NYU Libraries reference guide for gender terms (adapted from the GLAAD guide), plus a good listing of links to more online resources
- Definition guide in the Guardian, compiled by Sam Killermann and Meg Bolger of TheSafeZoneProject.com
- PR Newspaper media blog on AP style as relating to gender, etc.
- Public Relations Society of America article on AP style relating to gender
- A guide to researching sexuality and gender identity history from the National Archives, United Kingdom
- Intersectional GLAM's blog post: Archives and Inclusivity: Unearthing Erased Communities
- APA EDI Inclusive Language Guidelines

Disability

"**Disability**/noun/definition: a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions"[2]. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 1 in 5 over the age of 15 self-identify as a person with a disability[3].

Some agencies define issues related to disability and might require specific terms—for example, legal, medical, or governmental. If you curate an exhibition that includes people with disabilities, the context might determine the language used but please consider the viewpoint and desires of

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[2] Merriam-Webster definition of disability
[3] Americans With Disabilities: 2010, United States Census Bureau Report Number P70-131

the subjects. At the core of writing language that respects people with disabilities is an understanding of ableism: "The discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior"[4]. Negative descriptors such as *victim*, *suffers from*, and *damaged* are common and can be easily changed to share a neutral or positive image of people with disabilities.

Accessibility

Before discussing recommendations about language, it is important to also point out that accessibility and inclusion in your exhibit include more than just proper terminology[5]. Have you considered whether your space is accessible to all? Does the design of your posters help all properly read your text? Is the height of your cases and graphics appropriate? Resources are available with advice on how to make your exhibits accessible to all[6].

Notes About People-First Language

The debate over person-first versus identity-first language began over 40 years ago, and much of the current published literature shows a preference for *people-first language*, but this is not universally true for all people nor for all disabilities. Here are some of the viewpoints:

- "People with disabilities are, first and foremost, people. Labeling a person equates the person with a condition and can be disrespectful and dehumanizing. A person isn't a disability, condition or diagnosis; a person has a disability, condition or diagnosis. This is called Person-First Language"[7].
- "Identity-first language emphasizes that the disability plays a role in who the person is, and reinforces disability as a positive cultural identifier. Identity-first language is often preferred by self-advocates in the autistic, deaf, and blind communities"[8].
  - "Deaf and hard of hearing people have the right to choose what they wish to be called, either as a group or on an individual basis. Overwhelmingly, deaf and hard of hearing people prefer to be called 'deaf' or 'hard of hearing.… The alternative terms are often seen in print, heard on radio and television, and picked up in casual conversations all over. These terms include 'deaf and dumb,' 'deaf-mute,' and 'hearing-impaired.' The majority of deaf and hard of hearing people feel that these terms are outdated or offensive"[9].
  - The American Foundation for the Blind uses person-first language on their website, whereas the National Federation of the Blind has multiple articles about the preference for identity-first language, such as *the blind*, *blind person*, or *blind child*.

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[4] Ableism 101 blog post on Access Living
[5] Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice
[6] Smithsonian Directive 215, Accessibility for People with Disabilities Policy
[7] ADA National Network Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities
[8] Portrayal of People with Disabilities
[9] Frequently Asked Questions, National Association of the Deaf

General Recommendations

The following recommendations have been paraphrased from [guidelines published by the Americans with Disabilities Act National Network](#).

Think about whether the label needs information about the disability. Is it a necessary part of the story? For example, a label for a photo of a group of people at a party might not need to include information that one of them is blind, but if that same group picture was about climbing Mount Everest, the story might be enhanced with knowledge of different abilities in the group.

If possible, ask the person in the picture or the story of the exhibit if they would like to disclose their disability, and if so, ask them their preference for language and specificity. This is not always possible (or practical); if you choose to include this information, emphasize abilities, not limitations (example: person who uses a wheelchair, not confined to a wheelchair.)

Use neutral language wherever possible, avoid words with negative or passive connotations, such as victim, invalid, defective, afflicted, damaged (example: use burn survivor, not burn victim; use person with a brain injury, not brain damaged)

While it is acceptable to use the term *developmental disabilities*, it is preferable to use the name of the specific disability whenever possible. Conversely, if you are unsure of the person's specific disability, it is better to use umbrella terms; for example, if you think a person has cerebral palsy, but you are not sure, use *person with a disability* as *opposed to person with cerebral palsy*.

Use language that emphasizes the need for accessibility rather than the presence of disability (example: accessible parking not handicapped parking).

Reclaiming Language

Like with other diversity groups, terms are always changing, and there is a difference between how a person with a disability might describe themselves and how others describe them. For example, some people with disabilities are using the term *crip* in the process of reclaiming the word for their own power (examples: [the hashtag #CripTheVote](#), [the "Grumpy Cripple" Facebook group](#), [Crip Camp](#)). It is not currently considered appropriate to use this word except when quoting people from the community using it.

Preferred Terminology

There are too many terms that fall under the umbrella term *disability* to cover all of them in this guide, but there are sources that cover more specific individual conditions, such as the National Center on Disability and Journalism's [Disability Language Style Guide](#), which includes topics such as addiction, depression, wheelchairs, blindness, alcoholism, cerebral palsy, and neurodiversity, with specific references for each.

Understand this is just one source, and there is no universally right answer, but it is good to have a source that you can share if questioned on your decision to use specific language. Here are a

few examples edited from multiple sources, especially the [National Disability Authority Guidelines on Consultation](#).

Do Not Use	Use Instead
the disabled, challenged, differently abled	people with disabilities*
wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair	person who uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user
cripple, spastic, victim	person with a disability, person with multiple sclerosis, person with cerebral palsy
mentally handicapped	intellectually disabled
normal	nondisabled
schizo, mad, crazy	person with a mental health disability
suffers from Down syndrome, victim of Down syndrome	person with Down (or Down's) syndrome
suffers from (e.g., asthma)	has (e.g., asthma)

* Please note that some people prefer identity-first language, especially in the autistic, blind, and deaf communities.

Checklist for Revisions

As you review your writing, consider the following questions:

1. If you have mentioned someone's disability, was it necessary to do so? Is a person's disability pertinent or relevant to telling this story?
2. Do you use any negative stereotypes of people with disabilities?
3. Do you provide the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people with disabilities as for people without?
4. Have you taken care to use either people-first language or identity-first language based on the preferences of the people or group of people being described?
5. Have you emphasized abilities and not limitations?

6. Have you emphasized accessibility and not the presence of disability?
7. Have you been specific about a person's disability when known? If unknown, have you used the umbrella term *person with a disability* and not made assumptions?

Other Resources

- [Autistic Hoya—A blog by Lydia XZ Brown](#)
- [The National Disability Authority: Disability Statistics](#)
- [Association of University Centers on Disabilities](#)
- [Smithsonian Accessibility](#)
- [Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice](#)
- [Museum Accessibility Standards](#)
- [APA EDI Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)

Social Class and Socioeconomic Status

Social class, also called *class,* is defined as "a group of people within a society who possess the same socioeconomic status. Besides being important in social theory, the concept of class as a collection of individuals sharing similar economic circumstances has been widely used in censuses and in studies of social mobility"[10].

Journalists, historians, sociologists, politicians, and others use the term *class* and related words to describe groups of people and their positions in a hierarchical society. Terms such as *lower class* and *working class* are most often used to describe people with fewer financial resources and often correlate with racial groups who have historically not had equitable access to resources. Low socioeconomic status has myriad consequences, including a lack of access to political power, prestigious neighborhoods, educational opportunities, and geographical proximity to sources of healthy food. They may also have difficulty obtaining legal citizenship.

People in the *upper class* are the wealthiest members of society, hold the highest status, and wield the most political power. The *middle-class* category is more ambiguous and typically includes everyone in between. What makes these terms even harder to define is that socioeconomic status is subjective, and most Americans self-identify as middle class. In addition, they may use other factors to gauge their status, such as educational attainment. Socioeconomic class is also fluid for families and individuals over time. A family experiencing poverty one year may be considered *middle class* the next.

Writing About Socioeconomic Categories

Referring to individuals or communities as *lower class* or *low income* can be hurtful because of the negative associations connected to these terms. Before discussing someone's socioeconomic status in an exhibit label, first, consider the necessity for doing so. Does it add essential

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[10] [Social Class | Definition, Theories, & Facts | Britannica](#)

information that allows visitors to better understand the content of the exhibit narrative? If it is relevant to include such descriptors, use positive empowering alternatives to potentially harmful words. Conversely, people who are wealthy are often described as *prominent* or *important*. Consider the necessity of including such adjectives to describe individuals.

It is best to avoid categorizing individuals and communities using broad, all-encompassing language. People considered *working class* are not a homogeneous group any more than people in the so-called middle or upper classes. While people may be in the same economic bracket, they do not necessarily share the same background, culture, and worldview. People experience poverty in many ways, ranging from an elderly person living on social security in a rural area to a young college graduate struggling to get by on a low-paying job in the city.

Likewise, it does not necessarily follow that all rural people are more conservative or less educated than city dwellers.

Preferred Terminology

Do Not Use	Use Instead
disadvantaged, struggling, underprivileged	making ends meet on low wages, working hard to make ends meet, people facing barriers, people facing challenges because of poverty
poor, poorest, the poor, impoverished, low class, lower class people	people with limited means, low-wealth communities, people with incomes below the poverty line, low-income families
food stamps, the hungry	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, people experiencing food insecurity
working poor, deserving poor	people with low incomes
welfare, welfare mothers	Families who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits
third world countries, developing countries	use the names of the countries

Do Not Use	Use Instead
inner city, projects, ghetto, high-poverty neighborhoods	under-resourced, disinvested, neighborhoods with high poverty rates, low-income neighborhoods, areas with poverty
homeless, the homeless, vagrant, homeless shelter	people without fixed, regular, or adequate housing; transitional shelter; houseless; people experiencing houselessness; the unhoused
crime-ridden	neighborhoods with high crime rates
high school dropout	people with a grade school education
achievement gap	opportunity gap
low-performing school	under-resourced school

Checklist for revisions

As you review your writing, consider the following questions:

1. If you have mentioned an individual or group of individuals' rank or position in society, wealth, educational attainment, or citizenship status, was it relevant or necessary to do so?
2. Do you use any socioeconomic, occupational, educational, political, cultural (or other) stereotypes?
3. Have you made any sweeping generalizations based on class and socioeconomic status?
4. Do you provide the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people of differing economic and social status and backgrounds?
5. Have you depicted people and their community accurately? Have you made any omissions that might render members of a community invisible?
6. Have you used direct, clear language as opposed to euphemisms?

Other Resources

Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

Racial categorization schemes were invented to support worldviews that some groups of people are superior and some are inferior. There are three important concepts linked to this fact: (1) Race is a made-up social construct and not an actual biological fact. (2) Race designations have changed over time. Some groups that are considered *white* in the United States today were considered *nonwhite* in previous eras, in U.S. Census data, and in mass media and popular culture (for example, Irish, Italian, and Jewish people). (3) The way in which racial categorizations are enforced (the shape of racism) has also changed over time. For example, the racial designation of Asian American and Pacific Islander changed four times in the 19th century. That is, they were defined at times as white and at other times as not white. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, as designated groups, have been used by white people at different times in history to compete with African American labor.

As these designations have evolved over time, so too has the language used to write about them. For example, given the changing demographic trends in the United States, the word *minority* no longer accurately reflects the four primary racial/ethnic groups. The terms *emerging majority* and *people of color* have become popular substitutes, and to indicate inequitable treatment, *marginalized* and *minoritized* are also used. In addition, the terms used to refer to members of each community of color have changed over time. Whether to use the terms African American or Black; Hispanic American, Latinx, or Latino; Native American or American Indian; and Pacific Islander or Asian American depends on a variety of conditions, including your intended audiences' geographic location, age, generation, and, sometimes, political orientation.

Writing About Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

Writing about issues involving race calls for thoughtful consideration, precise language, and an openness to discussions with others of diverse backgrounds about how to frame what language is most appropriate, accurate, and fair. Avoid broad generalizations and labels; race and ethnicity are one part of a person's identity. Identifying people by race and reporting on actions that have to

do with race often go beyond simple style questions, thus challenging journalists to think broadly about racial issues before having to make decisions on specific situations and stories.

In all writing—not just race-, ethnicity-, or nationality-related writing—strive to accurately represent the world, or a particular community, and its diversity through the people you feature, quote, and depict in all formats. Omissions and lack of inclusion can render people invisible and cause anguish.

Consider carefully when deciding whether to identify people by race, ethnicity, or nationality. Often, it is an irrelevant factor, and drawing unnecessary attention to this can be interpreted as bigotry. There are, however, occasions when it is pertinent:

In stories that involve significant, groundbreaking, or historic events, such as being elected United States president, being named to the United States Supreme Court, or other notable occurrences. *Barack Obama was the first Black United States president. Sonia Sotomayor is the first Hispanic justice of the United States Supreme Court. Jeremy Lin is the first American- born NBA player of Chinese or Taiwanese descent.*

In other situations when race, ethnicity, or nationality is an issue, use judgment. Include these details only when they are clearly relevant and that relevance is explicit in the story. To be equitable and to address the norm of whiteness, this applies to both white and BIPOC people.

Deciding whether a specific statement, action, policy, etc., should be termed *racist*, or characterized in a different way, often is not clear-cut. Such decisions should include discussion with colleagues and/or others from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Begin by assessing the facts: Does the statement or action meet the definition of *racism*? That assessment need not involve examining the motivation of the person who spoke or acted, which is a separate issue that may not be related to how the statement or action itself can be characterized.

In general, avoid using *racist* or any other label as a noun for a person; it's far harder to match the complexity of a person to a definition or label than it is a statement or action. Instead, be specific in describing the person's words or actions. Again, discuss with collaborators, colleagues, and others from diverse backgrounds when the description may be appropriate for a person.

Cases in which the term racist might be used include identifying as racist support for avowed racist organizations, statements calling another race or ethnic group inferior, or employing negative stereotypes for different racial or ethnic groups. *The video shows the candidate wearing blackface and making racist statements including, "You're not white so you can't be right."*

Always provide specifics to describe the words or actions in question; using a broad and descriptive term such as racist requires supporting details and context. In doing so, avoid repeating derogatory terms, except in the rare circumstances when it is crucial to the story or the understanding of a news event. Provide context and historical perspective when appropriate to help convey the impact or implications of the words or actions.

Avoid using vague phrases to describe situations in which race is, or is alleged, or is perceived to be a central issue but that do not meet the definition of racist or racism. As alternatives, terms including *xenophobic*, *bigoted*, *biased*, *nativist*, or *racially divisive* may be clearer, depending on the context. In some cases, the term *racial* is appropriate: racial arguments, racial tensions, racial injustice. Avoid racially charged, racially motivated, or racially tinged, euphemisms that convey little meaning. Always give specifics about what was done, said, or alleged.

Do not use euphemisms for racist or racism when the latter terms are truly applicable. Mississippi has a history of racist lynchings, not a history of racially motivated lynchings. He is charged for the racist massacre of nine people at a Black church, not the racially motivated massacre of nine people at a Black church.

Do not use Black or white as a singular noun. For plurals, phrasing such as Black people, white people, Black teachers, white students is often preferable when clearly relevant. White officers account for 64% of the police force, Black officers 21%, and Latino and Latina officers 15%. The gunman targeted Black churchgoers. The plural nouns Blacks and whites are generally acceptable when clearly relevant and needed for reasons of space or sentence construction. He helped integrate dance halls among Blacks, whites, Latinos/Latinas, and Asian Americans.

Black and *white* are acceptable as adjectives when relevant.

Avoid *Caucasian* as a synonym for *white*, unless in a quotation.

The terms *people of color* and *racial minority/minorities* are generally acceptable terms for describing people of races other than *white* in the United States. The term *BIPOC* is often used when acknowledging that not all people of color face equal levels of injustice, although some people of color see it as not inclusive or equitable enough. When talking about just one group, be specific: *Chinese Americans* or *members of the Seminole Indian Tribe of Florida*, for example. Be mindful that some Native Americans say the terms *people of color* and *racial minority* fall short by not encompassing their sovereign status. Avoid referring to an individual as a *minority* unless in a quotation.

Biracial or *multiracial* is acceptable, when clearly relevant, to describe people with more than one racial heritage. These terms are usually more useful when describing large, diverse groups of people than individuals. Avoid *mixed-race*, which can carry negative connotations, unless a story subject prefers the term. Be specific if possible, and then use biracial for people of two heritages or multiracial for those of two or more on subsequent references if needed.

Use the capitalized term *Black* as an adjective in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense: *Black people, Black culture, Black literature, Black studies, Black colleges.* APA states that all racial and ethnic labels should be capitalized. However, AP says that Black should be capitalized, as it reflects a shared sense of identity and therefore can be regarded as an ethnic label, such as Asian or Hispanic, but as white people don't share history and culture in the same way, white should not be capitalized.

African American is also acceptable for those in the United States. The terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Americans of Caribbean heritage, for example, generally refer to themselves as *Caribbean American*. Follow an individual's preference if known, and be specific when possible and relevant. *Minneapolis has a large Somali American population because of refugee resettlement. The author is Senegalese American.*

The use of the capitalized *Black* recognizes that language has evolved, along with the common understanding that, especially in the United States, the term reflects a shared identity and culture rather than a skin color alone.

Also use *Black* in racial, ethnic, and cultural differences outside the United States to avoid equating a person with a skin color.

Use *Negro* or *colored* only in names of organizations or in rare quotations when essential.

Boy or *girl* is generally acceptable to describe males or females younger than 18. While it is always inaccurate to call people under 18 men or women and people 18 and older *boys* or *girls*, be aware of nuances and unintentional implications. Referring to Black males as *boys*, for instance, can be perceived as demeaning and call to mind historical language used by some to address Black men. Be specific about ages if possible, or refer to *Black youths, child, teen*, or similar.

Asian American is acceptable for an American of Asian descent. When possible, refer to a person's country of origin or follow the person's preference—for example, *Filipino American* or *Indian American.*

AAPI is an acronym for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The acronym is widely used by people within these communities but is not as well-known outside of them. Spell out the full term; use AAPI only in direct quotations and explain the term.

Avoid the euphemism *anti-Asian sentiment*, which conveys little meaning. Alternatives may include *anti-Asian bias*, *anti-Asian harassment*, *anti-Asian comments*, *anti-Asian racism*, *or anti-Asian violence*, depending on the situation. Be specific and give details about what happened or what someone says happened.

Asian is used to describe people from Asia. Avoid using Asian as shorthand for Asian American when possible. Be as specific as possible, using *East Asian*, *South Asian*, or *Southeast Asian* if it is known which region the person/people being written about are from. Using specific countries of origin, when known, is always the best option.

Do not use *orient* or *oriental* when referring to East Asian nations and their peoples. *Asian* is the acceptable term for an inhabitant of those regions.

Pacific Islander is used to describe the Indigenous people of the Pacific Islands, including Hawaii, Guam, and Samoa. The term should be used for people who are ethnically Pacific Islander, not for those who happen to live in the Pacific Islands region. Be specific about which communities

you are referring to whenever possible. Do not use Asian Pacific Islander unless referring to Pacific Islanders of Asian descent. Do not describe Pacific Islanders as Asian Americans, Asians, or of Asian descent.

Chicano is a term that Mexican Americans in the U.S. southwest sometimes use to describe their heritage. Use only if it is a person's preference.

Latino is often the preferred noun or adjective for a person from, or whose ancestors were from, a Spanish-speaking land or culture or from Latin America. *Latina* is the feminine form. While some prefer the gender-neutral term *Latinx*, for others this term is a colonial way of making Latinos/Latinas gender-neutral. Research has shown that a relatively small minority of Latino and Latina people have heard of the term and even fewer use it. When possible, ask the people you are depicting which they prefer. For groups of females, use the plural *Latinas*; for groups of males or of mixed gender, use the plural *Latinos*. *Hispanic* is also generally acceptable for those in the United States. Use a more specific identification when possible, such as *Cuban, Puerto Rican, Brazilian*, or *Mexican American*.

American Indians and *Native Americans* are both acceptable terms in general references for those in the United States when referring to two or more people of different tribal affiliations. For individuals, use the name of the tribe; if that information is not immediately available, try to obtain it. *He is a Navajo commissioner. She is a member of the Nisqually Indian Tribe. He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.* Some tribes and tribal nations use *member*, others use *citizen*. If in doubt, use *citizen*. Avoid words such as *wampum*, *warpath*, *powwow*, *teepee*, *brave*, *squaw*, which can be disparaging and offensive. In Alaska, the Indigenous groups are collectively known as Alaska Natives.

First Nations is a preferred term for Native tribes in Canada.

Indian is used to describe the peoples and cultures of the South Asian nation of India. Do not use the term as a shorthand for *American Indians*.

Tribe refers to a sovereign political entity; communities sharing a common ancestry, culture, or language; and a social group of linked families who may be part of an ethnic group. Capitalize the word tribe when part of a formal name of sovereign political entities or communities sharing a common ancestry, culture, or language. Identify tribes by the political identity specified by the tribe, nation, or community: the *Apache Tribe of Oklahoma*, the *Cherokee Nation*. The term *ethnic group* is preferred when referring to ethnicity or ethnic violence.

Capitalize Indigenous when used to refer to original inhabitants of a place. Bolivia's Indigenous peoples represent some 62% of the population.

Aborigine(al) is an outdated term referring to aboriginal people in Australia. It is considered offensive by some and should be avoided.

Illegal immigration is entering or residing in a country in violation of civil or criminal law. Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use *illegal* only to refer to an action, not a person: *illegal*

immigration but not *illegal immigrant*. Acceptable variations include *living in* or *entering a country illegally* or *without legal permission.*

Except in direct quotations, do not use the terms *illegal alien, an illegal, or illegals*. The often-used term *undocumented* for some is an inoffensive and accurate term, while for others it is inhumane.

Do not describe people as violating immigration laws without attribution.

Specify wherever possible how someone entered the country illegally and from where—crossed the border, overstayed a visa, what nationality, etc.

People who were brought into the country as children should not be described as having immigrated illegally. For people granted a temporary right to remain in the United States under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, use *temporary resident status* with details on the program lower in the story.

Preferred Terminology

Do Not Use	Use Instead
racially charged, racially motivated, racially tinged	racist, xenophobic, bigoted, biased, nativist, racially divisive, racial
Black(s)/black(s)/white(s) <n.>, White <adj.> Negro, colored Caucasian	Black <adj.>, white <adj.>
boy, girl	Black youth, child, teen
minority <n.>	people of color, racial minority/minorities
mixed-race	biracial, multiracial
Indian	Native American, American Indian
orient, oriental	Asia, Asian
anti-Asian sentiment	anti-Asian bias, anti-Asian harassment, anti-Asian comments, anti-Asian racism or anti-Asian violence
Chicano (unless it is an expressed preference)	Latino, Latina, Latinx
Aboriginal	Indigenous

Do Not Use	Use Instead
illegal immigrant, illegal alien, an illegal, illegals	illegal immigration, temporary resident status (for DACA recipients), immigrants without papers, unauthorized immigrants, undocumented Americans, people who have entered the United States without permission, those living in the country without legal permission, noncitizens, non-status immigrants

Checklist for Revising Writing About Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

As you review your writing, consider the following questions:

1. Have you used broad generalizations or labels? Could you have been more specific about a person's or group of people's identity?
2. Have you depicted people and their community accurately? Have you made any omissions that might render members of a community invisible?
3. Is identifying race, ethnicity, or nationality pertinent to telling this story? Have you drawn unnecessary attention to this?
4. Have you discussed with colleagues and collaborators to confirm that a particular event or interaction was racist, xenophobic, bigoted, nativist, biased, etc.? Have you provided sufficient context for that event or interaction?
5. Have you used direct, clear language as opposed to euphemisms?

Perhaps the best test for race-, ethnicity-, or nationality-related language is to imagine a diverse group of people reading your paper. Would each reader feel respected? Envisioning your audience is a critical skill in every writing context, and revising with a focus on race-, ethnicity-, or nationality-related language is a perfect opportunity to practice.

Other Resources

- AP Stylebook on race-related coverage (may require a subscription)
- Racial Equity Tools Glossary
- APA EDI Inclusive Language Guidelines
- Why the Term "BIPOC" Is so Complicated, Explained by Linguists
- 'Latinx' Hasn't Even Caught on Among Latinos. It Never Will
- From Hispanic to Latine: Hispanic Heritage Month and the Terms That Bind Us
- About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It
- Re-Humanizing Immigrant Communities in the Age of Trump: 5 Language Practices
- Is It Time to Say R.I.P. to 'POC'?
- Statement Against White Appropriation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color's Labor

- [What's the Deal with Latinx?](#)
- [Which Is Better Latino or Latinx?](#)
- [Erasure of Afro-Latinx/Indigenous Populations in Latinidad](#)
- [Elizabeth Acevedo—Afro Latin](#)
- [Jonathan Mendoza—Brown Boy, White Boy](#)
- [Latinos who Lunch: Episode 99: The ABC's of Latinidad](#)
- [Framework For Essential Understandings of Native Americans](#)
- [Teaching and Learning about Native Americans](#)
- [What It Means to Curate for My Native American Community](#)

Religion and Spirituality

Religion: The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods[11].

Via the article [Differentiating Spirituality from Religion](#) in Florida State University's *Character Clearinghouse*, according to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1979), religion:

- is a concern over what exists beyond the visible world (operating through faith and intuition, as opposed to reason);
- generally includes the idea of the existence of a single being, a group of beings, an eternal principle, or transcendental spiritual entity that has created the world, that governs it, that controls its destinies, or that intervenes occasionally in the natural course of its history;
- is a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects; and
- is the idea that ritual, prayer, spiritual exercises, or certain principles and conduct arise naturally as a human response to the belief in such a being or eternal principle.

Spirituality: The quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things[12].

Also via *Character Clearinghouse*'s Differentiating Spirituality from Religion, spirituality:

- is an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development;
- is the process of continually transcending one's current locus of centricity (e.g., egocentricity);
- is the development of a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community;

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[11] [Lexico definition of religion](#)
[12] [Lexico definition of spirituality](#)

- is the process of deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life; and
- involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence or center of value that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing.

Religious beliefs are widespread and diverse in the United States. With this in mind, it is critical to consider the potential implications of the religious or spiritual background of the audience you are writing to and about and to learn, connect, and engage with these communities. This is important not only when the subject of your writing focuses on topics of faith but also when writing on topics not specifically about a particular faith experience but that touch on matters of faith.

Biases Affect Our Language

As in other topics surrounding equity and inclusion, our own perspectives can create a cycle of biases and language choices, as well as customs that reinforce them. One's writing for an exhibit may default to one's own default perspective. In thinking about your own biases, it is important to guard against making assumptions based on the dominant cultural religion's interpretation, as the institutional archives one is drawing upon may also default to the dominant culture—in America, that default has been a white, Protestant culture. These are the cultural beliefs, values, and traditions that are dominant, or centered, in a society. Dominant cultural practices are thought of as *normal*, while other practices are undervalued or marginalized. And our language often supports and reinforces these inequities. Consideration should also be given to those with no religious affiliation, or those who are agnostic or atheist.

Examples of dominant cultural biases will come up in language in many ways. A common example is how the terms A.D. and B.C. in reference to eras of time refer to a Christian- centered idea. C.E. and B.C.E., meaning *Common Era* and *Before Common Era*, respectively, are recommended now. Other examples might be a bit less obvious. Faith traditions common in Asia, including Buddhism and Hinduism, can differ sharply from that of Jewish, Christian, or Islamic traditions. Temples, for instance, are typically not used for *worship* but for meditation; meditation is not necessarily *prayer*; to most, but not all Buddhists, Buddha is not a god.

Confucianism and Taoism, much practiced in East Asia, are ways of and guides to living. They are informal combinations of practical philosophies, values, and folk beliefs. Without an understanding of these faith traditions, or direct and open communication with these communities, many incorrect assumptions can find their way into your language.

In a multicultural society, we should strive for various cultures to be celebrated and reflected equally. [The University of Southern California Center for Religion and Civic Culture](#) recommends the following six principles for engaging faith communities.

- Be aware and understanding of the ideals and values of those you are writing about.
- Be cognizant of your own possible biases and blind spots.
- Engage the communities you are writing about.
- When in doubt, ask: How do you identify? What is your faith tradition, for example?

- Show respect and cultivate trust.
- Remember that the people you are writing about, as well as the writer, are all human beings and have different experiences, perspectives, and abilities.

These ideas reflect a mindset that shows respect, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness to those you are writing about. In the same way that we must show care in our language choices when describing religious practices and beliefs, we must also show awareness of appropriate handling, placement, and juxtaposition of religious artifacts in display cases. Muslims follow strict washing practices before handling the Qur'an (or Quran or Koran). The Qur'an is often placed on the highest shelf, for instance, to show respect and should not be handled by non- Muslims when printed in Arabic.

Preferred Terminology

Do Not Use	Use Instead
religion as a catch-all term	belief, faith expression, cultural tradition
church as a catch-all term	use the correct term for a person's place of faith gathering, synagogue, mosque, etc.
religious as a catch-all term	person of faith; consider also that faith, per se, might not be part of a person's experience; consider a person may identify as having spirituality as opposed to *religion*, or might have no spiritual or religious belief at all, or be agnostic or atheist
God as a catch-all term	use the term used by the person you are writing about
worship as a catch-all term	be careful with words like this; consider using words like *faith* or *spiritual practice*; remember that not all practices are considered worship

Checklist for Religion-Related Revisions

As you review your writing, consider the following questions:

- Is identifying a person's religion pertinent or relevant to telling this story? Or are you drawing unnecessary attention to a person's religion because it is different from your own or the predominant culture's religious expression?
- Have you asked the people you are writing about what their personal religious

expression is? Could you have been more thoughtful about a person's or group of people's identity?
- Have you depicted people and their community accurately? Have you made any omissions that might render members of a community invisible?
- Have you discussed with colleagues and collaborators to understand as best you can the historical or recent realities and events that may surround a religious group's experience in our culture?
- Have you checked to be certain that your language shows respect to the person or people's faith experience and used direct, clear language as opposed to euphemisms?

As in race-related writing, it is best to imagine a diverse group of people reading your writing. Would each reader feel respected? Would anyone feel *othered* or marginalized? Keeping in mind your audience is the key.

Other Resources

The list of possible entries to include in an even abridged glossary of terms would be too exhaustive for this document, given the amount of information available. Refer to the preferred terminology list above and the longer glossaries in the links below for many more specific examples.

- [Religion Glossary—Diversity Style Guide](#)
- [AP Stylebook on religion](#)
- [Religious and Spiritual Diversity | The Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Health Equity](#)
- [APA EDI Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)

Ageism

Ageism is defined as "prejudice or discrimination against a particular age group and especially the elderly"[13].

Ideas about aging are learned beginning in childhood and are shaped by the images and stereotypes prevalent in American popular culture. Stereotypes about older people include that they are incompetent with technology, cognitively challenged (who hasn't used the term *senior moment* to describe a temporary mental lapse?), stubborn, sexless, unattractive, dependent, poor drivers, and more. These ideas, and the words we use to perpetuate them, influence our thoughts about ourselves as we age, which can be harmful to our health. Studies have shown that internalized ageism is associated with lower life expectancy, high blood pressure, and reduced self-esteem. Consequently, organizations such as the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and Associated Press have been revamping the language they use to discuss age.

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[13] [Ageism Definition & Meaning | Merriam-Webster](#)

Although we most frequently hear about age discrimination against older people, younger adults may experience reverse ageism. For example, younger adults often feel that their ideas are not being taken seriously. In recent years, young *millennial* adults (born between 1980 and 1995) have sometimes been categorized as lazy and self-absorbed.

Writing About Age

Consider how we might label a photo of three unidentified men who appear to be in their 70s. Our impulse to be as descriptive as possible may lead us to describe the photo as being of "three old/older men." The adjective *older* is now preferred to the word *old*. But is the inclusion of older even relevant?

Newspapers have traditionally included the age of their subjects as a way of distinguishing between people of the same name. (Up until the 1960s, newspaper articles often identified people by race and home address.) Nevertheless, when writing exhibit labels, it is not necessary or even desirable to identify a subject's chronological age unless it adds information that increases understanding of the topic.

First, the definition of older is subjective. To a teenager, anyone over 40 may be seen as old. To a 40-year-old, *older* may only pertain to someone over 65. Someone in their 60s may consider themselves middle-aged. While the word *retiree* may seem like a safe choice, many consider it inappropriate because it insinuates retirement from life. And people who have never worked cannot legitimately be called *retirees*.

Furthermore, we tend to *other* people of different age groups, which makes us feel that we have nothing in common with them. Different characteristics have been attributed to different generations. Avoid identifying people as being a member of an age group, such as millennials, Gen Xers, or boomers, unless you are discussing topics about generations.

When identifying individuals by their age or discussing age in an exhibit, use language that is respectful and inclusive. When in doubt, use the following chart for guidance.

Preferred Terminology

Do Not Use	Use Instead
the elderly, elders, old people, elderly people, the aged, aging dependents, seniors, senior citizens	older adults, older people persons 65 years and older the older population, people over the age of [ ], people between the ages of [ ] and [ ]

Do Not Use	Use Instead
senility, senile	dementia, people with dementia
baby boomers	people born between 1946 and 1964
old age home, old folks' home, retirement home	housing for older adults, assisted living facility; use the name of the community

Checklist for Revisions

The following checklist is adapted from the checklist in [the writing guide on gender-inclusive language provided by UNC-Chapel Hill's Writing Center](#).

As you review your writing, consider the following questions:

1. Have you included the age of an individual or group of individuals when it was unnecessary to do so?
2. Have you used broad generalizations or labels?
3. Do you use any ageist stereotypes?
4. Have you emphasized abilities and not limitations?
5. Have you provided the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people of different age groups?

Other Resources

- [Media Takes: On Aging](#)
- [APA Guide on Bias-Free Language: Age](#)
- [When Does Someone Become Old? The Atlantic](#)
- [An Examination of Generational Stereotypes as Path Towards Reverse Ageism](#)
- [Reframing Aging](#)
- ['Young at Heart': Discourses of Age Identity in Travel Agency Interaction](#)
- [The Language of Ageism: Why We Need to Use Words Carefully](#)
- [APA EDI Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)

Appendix A: Content Notes and Warnings

Information is never inert. An exhibit contains many kinds of information, including text, media, objects, and special effects. Part of an organizer's responsibility in considering the exhibit experience is anticipating content that needs informational support or could be found offensive or harmful. In the case of the former, a content note may be helpful, and a content warning may be necessary for the latter.

If a note or warning is deemed necessary, always be informative, not obtrusive. A note or warning is there to support and enhance the viewer's experience, not to send them running away. Be as transparent as possible in brief, clear prose.

Content Notes

A content note is language within the exhibit space that gives a viewer background information and context that helps them get the most out of the exhibit. Technically, the introductory text at the very beginning of an exhibit is a content note. A more specific content note may be necessary to explain your curatorial or informational decisions in crafting the exhibit or to unpack a particularly interesting or significant detail in more depth, like how a footnote adds secondary information to the primary text of a book.

Note Placement

Content notes that apply to the entire exhibit are placed at the beginning of an exhibit. Notes about specific points in the exhibit may be placed at those points.

Example Notes

A [content note for the *Beyond Supply & Demand* exhibit at Duke University Libraries](#), which honors 100 years of women's suffrage, opens with the following text about the font used throughout the exhibit:

> If you are able to visit the physical rendition of the library exhibition [Beyond Supply & Demand](#), you might notice that some of the L's look quite distinctive. The font used for the titles is called *Carrie* and was created by Tre' Seals, founder of [Vocal Type Co.](#) He was inspired by design used in the Women's Suffrage movement (note the L's in this photograph from 1915). The font's name honors suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt (under the banner and leading the parade).

Other content notes may overlap with content warnings in their acknowledgment of content or in providing information about how organizers made decisions about what to include in the exhibit and why. This content note recognizes specific communities of people who might find exhibit content problematic. It also contains some general language and an organizational disclaimer:

Content Warnings

A content warning is language within the exhibit space that lets viewers know of possibly controversial, offensive, or harmful content in the exhibit so that they can make an informed decision about whether or not they want to see the exhibit. Content warnings can also offer protection to people featured in the exhibition and to exhibit curators or their institution. Content warnings are also sometimes referred to as trigger warnings.

What qualifies as "possibly controversial, offensive, or harmful content" can range widely and is, ultimately, a judgment call by the exhibit organizers. It's impossible to write an objective, clear guideline about when to use a content warning and how specific that content warning should be; the organizers must use their knowledge about their institution and their exhibit audience, their expertise in the subject matter of the exhibit and the materials used in it, and an informed sense of the campus and social context of the exhibit, to craft a content warning.

Neither are all content warnings the same. An exhibit might contain a quote that uses outdated language or an epithet now considered offensive, or a photograph of a protestor carrying an offensive sign. An exhibit might be about war or sexual politics and necessarily depict violent or explicit content that some viewers may find upsetting. Subjects that may require warnings are certainly not limited to those mentioned as examples here.

In many cases, a brief, general, catch-all content warning is appropriate—something along the lines of the following: "Historical materials may contain offensive content." In other cases, particular exhibit content may need a more specific statement.

Warning Placement

Content warnings are generally placed at the beginning of an exhibit before any of the content can be encountered by a viewer. Warnings about specific points in the exhibit may also be placed at those points. Consider the way visitors enter and move through your exhibit space when making decisions about the placement of content warnings. Try not to dominate the content with too many content warnings as well

Categories of Content Warnings or Disclaimers

Content warnings may include one or more of the following statements:

- Statement about content being a product of its time and place
- Statement about the incompatibility of past content with the values of the library/university today
- Statement saying that the library does not endorse any beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, or behaviors depicted in their archives
- Statement about the value of preserving and making the historical record available, even when harmful
- Explanation of principles of equity and reconciliation by better identifying topics of interest to marginalized and equity-seeking communities
- Explanation of policy regarding the use of content warnings
- Invitation to contact the library to ask for remediation
- Invitation to contact the library if distressed by content
- Warning that special effects may be harmful to people with health concerns

General Warnings

A brief, generic warning is often appropriate. NC State University Libraries frequently place a single sentence at the opening to exhibits and on their Special Collections Research Center web pages: "Please note that some historical materials may contain offensive content." UNC- Chapel Hill Libraries, in their "Organized Womanhood" exhibit, used a comparable warning with a bit more elaboration: "This site includes historical materials that may contain language or negative stereotypes reflecting the culture or language of a particular period or place. These items are presented as part of the historical record."

General warnings may also need a slight specificity. For example, "This exhibit contains depictions of nudity. Visitor discretion is advised."

Specific Warnings

Specific warnings may cover an entire exhibit or just a specific point in the exhibit. They may also include a justification for having included the content that they're warning viewers about.

Example of a specific warning that covers an entire exhibit: "This exhibit contains photographs that depict wartime violence and its aftermath that some viewers may find disturbing."

Example of a specific warning that covers images and special effects from the North Carolina Museum of History*:* "A simulated battlefield environment--including bright lights, flashing lights, and loud noises--in this exhibit may be disturbing to children or visitors with health concerns. In addition, some images may not be suitable for some visitors.

Example of a specific warning that covers a specific point in an exhibit: "The final section of this exhibit contains narratives from survivors of sexual assault and abuse."

Example of a specific warning that includes a justification for the content: "Photographs in this exhibit contain offensive language and racial epithets. These images have been included in order to accurately present historical events."

Even specific warnings need not go into detail; you don't want the warning itself to be a trigger.

Other Resources

The University of Michigan's [An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings](#) lists some topics for which content warnings are most commonly issued. The University of Waterloo also has [a resource about trigger warnings](#) that is useful, even though it is intended to be used by instructors for classroom resources.

Appendix B: Exhibition Acknowledgments and Thanks

A team of people, with a variety of specialist skills, is required to create an exhibition. Such partners may include curators, facilities workers, faculty, students, organizations, donors, archivists, advisors, conservators, translators, preservationists, digital production staff, designers, fabricators, and other collaborators. Much of this labor has traditionally been hidden, and the curatorial voice is often anonymous. In the interest of transparency and to recognize the work that people do, acknowledgment notes or panels are increasingly used.

An acknowledgment, or credit, note identifies the people involved in the creation of an exhibition and often thanks them. The aim is to provide appropriate and equitable credit, and this may include tiers of involvement.

Note Placement

Acknowledgment notes are placed at the start of the exhibition, sometimes added to the bottom of the introductory panel.

Example Notes

In the acknowledgment notes for two exhibits at the Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill, departments that provided an in-house service (such as the Digital Production Center) are listed; individuals are named when they performed specific tasks unique to this exhibition:

This exhibit was created by North Carolina Collection staff Alison Barnett, Stephen Fletcher, Linda Jacobson, and Bob Schreiner, with the assistance of Amanda Biddix, Emmi Farrell, and Kate Trathen. Special thanks go to the Conservation Lab and the Digital Production Center.

The North Carolina Collection wishes to thank guest curators Doug Wait and Stephanie Willen Brown. And for their help with selecting and translating foreign language papers, we are grateful to Sarah Carrier, Julio Estorino, Lily Kirkhoff, Dong Neuck Lee, and Sara Levinson.

Acknowledgment notes provide an opportunity to thank contributors who have given their time freely to support the exhibition, as is the case with subject experts and community members who are invited to advise on or supply exhibition content or review narratives and text.[*] This example of an acknowledgment note for UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' *Ancient and Living Maya in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Archaeological Discovery, Literary Voice, and Political Struggle* online exhibit gives credit to the faculty and subject-specialist librarians who acted as curatorial advisors and reviewed exhibition content.

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[*] It is important to compensate community members for their labor. If they cannot or do not want to be paid, resources that remain in community settings or training opportunities are alternative forms of compensation.

Example Credits

Exhibition Curator: Claudia Funke Research: Sam Krieg, Betsy Hagerty Gamm

Photography: Digital Production Center, UNC Library Website Theme Design: Sharon Austin

Technical Assistance: Emily Brassell, Tyler Gilmore, Michael Millner, Anna Morton, Anna Twiddy, Alia Wegner

The Rare Book Collection is grateful to George E. Stuart, Teresa Chapa, Emilio del Valle Escalante, Patricia McAnany, and David Mora Morín for their scholarly generosity.

Land Acknowledgments

A land acknowledgment is a statement that recognizes Indigenous people as traditional stewards of an area of land. The statement conveys a respect for the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their traditional territories and acknowledges the past and current colonial possession of the land.

Land acknowledgments should only be one component of a larger action plan to support Native students, faculty, staff, and community members. The First Nations Graduate Circle at the UNC-Chapel Hill recommends additional action items, including

- centering Native public-facing content (for example, on home and landing pages)
- establishing research commissions
- decolonizing campuses by celebrating Indigenous presence (for example, erecting markers around campus that identify historical and cultural sites of significance to engage the campus community and visitors on a walking tour)

Resources and Examples
- [A Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgment](#)
- [Text This Number in the US to Find Out Which Native Land You're Living On](#)
- [Understanding the Land Acknowledgement](#)
- [Land Acknowledgment: You're on California Indian Land. Now What?](#)
- [Call for a Land Acknowledgment @UNC!](#)