

Inclusive language

Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, conveys respect for all people, and promotes equal opportunities.



Detail from an embroidered pillow (freeimages.com)

An increasing number of scientific publishers and journals are requesting authors to use inclusive language, i.e. to use language that is culturally sensitive and inclusive of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Elsevier: “Writing needs to be free from bias, stereotypes, slang, reference to dominant culture, and cultural assumptions, while images and case studies should be representative of all populations.”

Wiley: offer authors the opportunity to submit a manuscript sample for sensitivity review by experts in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I).

Selected recommendations from these publishers:

- Content should ...contain nothing that might imply one individual is superior to another on the grounds of age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, disability, or health condition.
- Seek gender neutrality by using plural nouns (“clinicians, patients/clients”) wherever possible to avoid using “he, she,” or “he/she.”
- Avoiding using descriptors that refer to personal attributes such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, disability, and health condition unless there is scientific or clinical relevance.
- Racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized, e.g. “Blacks are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (proper noun usage); diabetes disproportionately affects the Black population (adjectival usage)”.
- The terms male and female should be used when describing the sex of human participants or other sex-related biological or physiological factors. Differences between males and females should be termed “**sex differences**” rather than “gender differences.” **Gender** comprises the social, environmental, cultural, and behavioural factors and choices that influence a person’s self-identity and health. Gender includes gender identity, gender norms, and gender relations.
- Suggested terminology for referring to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning community is LGBTQ+.

What words should I use then?

- **See the next page for a list of inclusive alternatives to non-inclusive words and phrases**

Table 1: A list of inclusive alternatives to non-inclusive words and phrases*

*Most items are from Table 1 in: Likis, F.E. (2021), Inclusive Language Promotes Equity: The Power of Words. Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health, 66: 7-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmwh.13225>

TERMS TO AVOID	TERMS TO USE
Non-white	People of colour
Caucasian	White
At-risk, needy, disadvantaged	People with low income
The homeless	People experiencing homelessness, people who are homeless
Transgenders, transgendered, transsexual	Transgender [man/woman/person]
Husband, wife	Spouse, partner
Mother, father	Parent
The elderly, the aged, seniors	Older adults, older people
Geriatric (to refer to people)	Aged XX and older
Suffers from, victim of, afflicted by	Has, lives with
Handicapped	with (physical) disability
Diabetics	People with diabetes
Wheelchair-bound	Uses a wheelchair
Mental retardation	Intellectual disability, developmental disability
Blacklist	Blocklist
Whitelist	Allow list (allowlist)

See more here:

Likis, F.E. (2021), Inclusive Language Promotes Equity: The Power of Words. Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health, 66: 7-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmwh.13225>

Ashwell, S.J., Baskin, P.K., Christiansen, S.L., DiBari, S.A., Flanagan, A., Frey, T., Jemison, R. and Ricci, M. (2023). Three recommended inclusive language guidelines for scholarly publishing: Words matter. Learned Publishing 36:94-99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1527>