

# INCLUSIVE WRITING GUIDE

UPDATED 3/22/2023



**OFFICE of EQUITY  
and HUMAN RIGHTS**  
CITY OF PORTLAND



# INTRODUCTION

Language matters. This Inclusive Writing Guide is designed to help City of Portland staff communicate in a way that serves the entire community.

Language is critical when navigating topics of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Inclusive writing shows that we listen and care, which helps build trust and credibility with our readers.

Language is fluid. Some individuals within groups disagree about terminology, which can discourage some from participating in discussions about identity because they don't want to "get it wrong" or offend someone. If we avoid

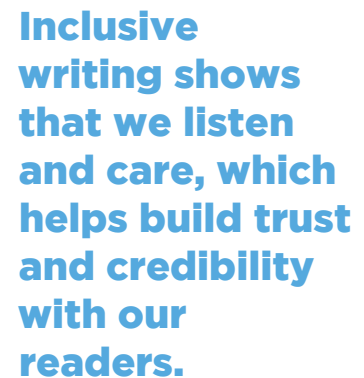
difficult conversations, we are not helping to build an inclusive environment.

As our understanding of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability evolves, we must make informed choices about language and adopt a continuous improvement approach—striking a balance between following the lead of the individuals most affected, while using resources developed by experts to avoid overburdening those most affected.

Culturally conscious writers stay up to date on inclusive and equitable language, observing and learning how people and groups self-identify. This guide is a City-wide collaboration and will

be updated as terms and language evolve, and the Office of Equity welcomes ongoing input and feedback from all City staff.

Some bureaus have developed their own writing guides and this resource is designed to serve as a complement to those existing publications.



**Inclusive writing shows that we listen and care, which helps build trust and credibility with our readers.**

## All content published by the City of Portland should meet these standards:

- 1. Equity.** City communications should touch everyone in our community. We reach the greatest number of people in our community by being culturally conscious, using clear language, translating our content into multiple languages, and using various communications channels.
- 2. Simplicity.** All written communication should help community members access and understand City services, policies, and procedures. To this end, writers should use plain language, short sentences, and simple words to convey information. Avoid jargon, abbreviations, and technical language. For more guidance on plain language, visit: <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/>
- 3. Trust.** City of Portland writing should convey a sense of authority and respect—we want to be a trusted source of information. We accomplish this by ensuring our information is community-centered, accurate, and making it clear that the City of Portland is the author of City content.
- 4. ADA Accessibility.** We create non-text alternatives, large print, speech/audio options, and symbols that can be accessed using all assistive technologies.

# BEST PRACTICES

**Mention race, ethnicity, disability, gender, and other identities only if relevant to the story.**

Example:

*Attaf Abbasi, supported construction of the new pump station in the neighborhood* instead of, *Pakistani resident, Attaf Abbasi, supported construction of the new pump station in the neighborhood.*

**Avoid acronyms unless widely known, even on second reference.**

For example, when referring to City bureaus, ask a bureau representative for the preferred name:

*Office of Equity and Human Rights* or *Office of Equity*, but never *OEHR*.  
*Portland Water Bureau* or *Portland Water*, not *PWB*.

**Use people-first language.** Use terms that focus on people rather than on the method of categorization to ensure your language is not dehumanizing. For example, use *people with mental illness* rather than the *mentally ill*.

**Use gender-neutral terms.** Use *they* instead of *he* or *she* if you do not know a person's pronouns. Use *maintenance hole* instead of *manhole*.

**Avoid terms that imply inferiority or superiority.** For example, use *low socioeconomic status* rather than *lower class*. The word *status* is not interchangeable with *class* because *status* can refer to other measures such as popularity. Use *people who are systemically excluded* or *institutionally oppressed*, rather than *minority*.

**Avoid negatively charged language.** For example, *Shanice uses a wheelchair* rather than, *Shanice is confined to a wheelchair*. *Kenji is diagnosed with bipolar disorder* not *Kenji suffers from bipolar disorder*.

**Do not use victimizing language when referring to people with disabilities.** Do not use *afflicted*, *restricted*, *stricken*, *suffering*, or *unfortunate*.

**Avoid the use of idioms and catchphrases. They are difficult to translate and occasionally have ableist or racialized historical context.** For example, *Craig was disappointed in the park design* rather than *Craig thought the park design was lame*. *Quinton is a junior staff member* rather than *Quinton is the low man on the totem pole*.



**When referring to City bureaus, ask a bureau representative for the preferred name: Office of Equity and Human Rights or Office of Equity, but never OEHR.**



# RACIAL AND CULTURAL TERMS

## African American

No hyphen. Acceptable for an American Black person of African descent. The terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Americans of Caribbean heritage, for example, generally refer to themselves as *Caribbean American*. Follow a person's preference.

## Asian American

No hyphen. 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*.

Do not refer to *Pacific Islanders* as *Asian Americans*, *Asians*, or *of Asian descent*.

## AAPI

*Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders*. The acronym is widely used by people within these communities, however many Pacific Islanders prefer to be addressed as a separate group, as such, the term is discouraged. Spell out the full term; use *AAPI* only in direct quotations and explain the term.

Do not use the term unless your content is specifically about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders as a group. Be specific when possible.

## BIPOC

*Black, Indigenous, and people of color* or *Black and Indigenous People of Color*. The acronym was created to acknowledge and avoid erasure of the unique histories and experiences of oppression and exclusion experienced by Black and Indigenous people when grouped with other people of color.

The acronym has been misused and has lost the spirit of its original intent. Spelling out acronyms is always preferable, but *BIPOC* or *Black, Indigenous, and people of color* should only be used when Black and Indigenous communities are being highly prioritized—for example, if your communication shares details of a project that does not specifically prioritize Black or Indigenous communities, use the terms *people of color* or *communities of color*. The Associated Press recommends avoiding the term.

Be aware that *BIPOC* is often used as a euphemism to avoid saying *Black* and as a virtue signal to seem inclusive without actually being inclusive. *BIPOC* or *Black, Indigenous, and people of color* should only be used with precise specificity or within a direct quote.

Do not use *BIPOC* for an individual.

## **biracial, multiracial**

Acceptable, when clearly relevant, to describe people with more than one racial heritage. Usually more useful when describing large, diverse groups of people rather than individuals. Avoid *mixed-race*, which can carry negative connotations, unless the 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. *Multiracial* can encompass people of any combination of races.

Examples:

*She has an African American father and a white mother instead of, She is biracial.*

*The study of biracial people showed a split in support along gender lines.*

## **Black**

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*. The lowercase *black* is a color, not a person.

*African American* is also acceptable for those in the U.S. 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.

Examples:

*Portland has a large Somali American population because of refugee resettlement.*

*The author is Senegalese American.*

Do not use the term as a singular noun: *Blacks*

Do not write in a way that assumes white is the default.

Not: *The officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black.* Instead: *The white officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black.*

## **Caucasian**

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

## **enslaved people**

Use this term, not *slaves*. The term emphasizes that the slave status has been imposed on individuals. The term *slave* denotes an inherent identity of a person or people treated as chattel or property.

## **digital Blackface**

Non-Black peoples' use of images, emojis, and memes featuring Black people online and in texts, often depicting exaggerated reactions.

## immigrant

Immigrant and refugee rights are increasingly under attack by U.S. institutions, while racially derogatory and dehumanizing language used in the media and political discourse has contributed to a rise in hate crimes against immigrants.

Avoid focusing on groups of immigrants or refugees in a way that misses the individuals that make up those groups. Be specific with countries of origin when possible and relevant.

Example: *Portland has a large Somali American population because of refugee resettlement.*

Do not use the term *illegal* to refer to a person or their immigration status. By definition, a person is never *illegal*. The term is not only legally inaccurate, but also dehumanizes, is deliberately divisive, and fuels racial profiling. Use the term *undocumented* if it is relevant to the story or article.

The City of Portland serves all community members regardless of their immigration status.

## Indigenous (see also *Native People*)

Capitalize this term used to refer to original inhabitants of a place. Use *Indigenous People* or *Native People* to start, knowing that others may have other preferences. *Native American* is a government term. For individuals, use the name of the tribe; if that information is not immediately available, try to obtain it.

Examples:

*The City's Tribal Summit featured Indigenous speakers from the region.*

*Michele is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.*

*Maria (Coeur d'Alene) spoke of the importance of Native Peoples' access to healthcare at the Conference of Mayors.*

## Latino, Latina, Latinx, Latine

*Latino* is often the preferred noun or adjective for a person who is from or whose family origins are from a Latin American country. *Latina* is the feminine form. The gender-neutral term is *Latinx* or *Latine*. For groups of women or girls, use the plural *Latinas*; for groups of males or of mixed gender, use the plural *Latinos*. Use a more specific country of origin identification when possible, such as *Cuban*, *Puerto Rican*, *Colombian*, *Brazilian*, or *Mexican American*.

## minority

Do not use the term *minority* when describing non-white communities. People of color are not a global minority. The term minimizes systemically excluded people and promotes erasure. Instead, use *people of color* or *systemically excluded and institutionally oppressed people*.

## **multilingual**

A strengths-based term that acknowledges and respects that many people who benefit from increased language access with our City government are often fluent in multiple languages. The term, *limited English proficiency*, can be used when used in legal context or in a direct quotation.

## **Native People**

Use *Native People* or *Indigenous People* to start, knowing that others may have other preferences. This term is not historically loaded. For individuals, use the name of the tribe; if that information is not immediately available, try to obtain it.

## **Pacific Islander**

Used to describe the Indigenous people of the Pacific Islands, including but not limited to Hawaii, Guam, and Samoa. Should be used for people who are ethnically Pacific Islander, not for those who happen to live in Pacific Islands. Be specific about which communities you are referring to whenever possible.

## **people of color**

The term is acceptable when necessary, in broad references to multiple races other than white: *We will hire more people of color. Nine playwrights of color collaborated on the script.*

Be aware, however, that many people of various races object to the term for various reasons, including that it lumps together into one monolithic group anyone who isn't white.

Be specific whenever possible by referring to, for instance, *Black Americans*, *Chinese Americans*, or *members of the Klamath Tribe*.

Examples:

*The poll found that Black and Latinx Americans are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's financial impact, not people of color are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's financial impact.*

*Most of the magazine's readers are Black women, not most of the magazine's readers are women of color.*

In some cases, other wording may be appropriate. Examples: *people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds; diverse groups; various heritages; different cultures.*

Do not use *person of color* for an individual.

Do not use the shorthand *POC* unless necessary in a direct quotation; when used, explain it.

## race-related language

Be aware that some words and phrases that seem innocuous to one group can carry negative connotations to another. Be sensitive to your varied audiences and their different perceptions of language and the larger world.

For instance, many people see thug as code for a racial slur and *unarmed Black man* could be seen as assuming the default is for Black men to be armed.

## white

Do not capitalize when referring to one's race. It's important to note that *white* and *whiteness* are a social construct that serves to reinforce power structures. Generally, white people do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color. Capitalizing the term *white*, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs.

Do not use the term as a singular noun: *whites*

Do not write in a way that assumes white is the default.

Not: *The officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black.* Instead: *The white officer is accused of profiling Owens, who is Black.*



# DISABILITY TERMS

## able-bodied

This term is often used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. The term *non-disabled* is also acceptable. As with most terms, follow a person's preference.

## disabilities

Avoid writing that implies *ableism*: the belief that typical abilities—those of people who are non-disabled—are superior. Also avoid stereotyping phrasing that equates “thin” or “able-bodied” with health. Ableism is a concept similar to racism, sexism, and ageism in that it includes stereotypes, generalizations and demeaning views and language. It is a form of discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

Do not describe an individual as having a disability unless it is clearly pertinent to the story.

Example: *Sonia, who is blind and walks with the help of a guide dog, said they are pleased with the City's walkway improvements.* Not: *Zhang, who has paraplegia, is a fan of the Portland Trail Blazers.*

Be specific about the type of disability, or symptoms.

Example: *Claire, who has autism and is very sensitive to sounds, said she's happy the Portland Building has provided sound dampening architecture in working spaces.*

When possible, ask people how they prefer to be described. Some view their disability as central to their identity and use identity-first language such as *paraplegic man* or *a paraplegic*.

Others prefer person-first language such as *a man with paraplegia*.

You may use the adjective *blind* to describe a person who identifies as having almost complete vision loss or lack of vision. Use *low vision* to describe a person who identifies as having limited vision.

In describing groups of people, or when individual preferences can't be determined, use person-first language.

Avoid using disability-related words lightly or in unrelated situations.

Examples: calling a person or an idea *crazy, lame, demented, psychotic, blind, catatonic, moronic, on the spectrum*, etc.; saying a plan *falls on deaf ears* or *he turned a blind eye*, or *the awards show is schizophrenic*.

As in all writing, consider word choice carefully.

Some people with mobility disabilities feel that we are not speaking about them when we rely very heavily on the term *walking*. In these cases, it is best to either clarify that walking is inclusive of people who use mobility devices, or to use terms like *walking and rolling* for inclusivity.

Words that seem innocuous to some people can have specific and deeply personal or offensive meanings to others. Consider alternative phrasing.

Other language or constructions not to use:

- Words that suggest pity, such as *afflicted with*, *battling* or *suffers from any disability or illness*, or that *a person overcame her disability*. Instead: *living with dementia*, *has cancer*, etc.
- Clichés such as *inspiring* and *brave*.
- Dehumanizing mass terms such as *the disabled*, *the blind*, *the mentally ill*, etc. As with all writing, avoid broad generalizations, labels, and stereotypes.
- Negative language such as *confined to a wheelchair* or *wheelchair-bound*. Instead, use terms like *wheelchair user*.

## **mental illness**

Mental illness is a general term. Specific conditions are disorders and should be used whenever possible. Avoid descriptions that connote pity, such as *afflicted with*, *suffers from*, *victim of*, *battling*, and *demons*. Do not use terms related to mental health casually, in unrelated context such as, *His emails gave me PTSD*, when the person does not actually experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Avoid terms such as *the mentally ill*. Instead: *people with mental illnesses*. Do not use wording such as *he is a schizophrenic*, *she was anorexic*, or *he is mentally ill*. Instead, use *he was diagnosed with schizophrenia*, *they were diagnosed with anorexia*, or *he was treated for depression*.

# GENDER AND LGBTQIA+ TERMS

## deadnaming

The act of calling a transgender person by an incorrect name. Often, this is a name they were given at birth and no longer use.

## gay, lesbian

Used to describe people attracted to the same sex, though *lesbian* is the more common term for women. Include sexual orientation only when it is pertinent to a story. Sexual orientation is not synonymous with gender.

## gender and sexuality

Gender is not synonymous with sex. Gender refers to a person's social identity, while sex refers to biological characteristics.

## LGBTQIA2S+

This acronym is constantly being updated and stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and Two-Spirit. While each letter in *LGBTQIA2S+* stands for a specific group of people, the term encompasses the entire spectrum of gender fluidity and sexual identities. Use of *LGBTQIA2S+* is best as an adjective and an umbrella term. Don't use it, for example, when the group you're referring to is limited to *bisexuals*.

## misgendering

The act of using the wrong pronouns when talking to or about someone.

## nonbinary

People are nonbinary if their gender identity is not strictly male or female. *Nonbinary* isn't synonymous with *transgender*. In stories about people who identify as neither male nor female or ask not to be referred to as he/she/him/her, use the person's name in place of a pronoun, or otherwise reword the sentence, whenever possible.

Use terms that do not assume binary identities:

- Instead of saying *pregnant women*, say *pregnant people*.
- Instead of *women's health rights*, say *reproductive rights*.
- Instead of *feminine hygiene products*, say *menstrual products* or *period products*.
- Instead of *breast feeding*, say *chest feeding*.

Using *they/them* pronouns when referring to a single person when the gender isn't known or you're using generic language is advisable, rather than *he/she*.

For example: *Whoever the top engineering candidate is, they will be notified in the coming months.*

## **Pride, pride**

Capitalize *Pride* when referring to events or organizations honoring LGBTQIA+ communities and on subsequent references. Lowercase *pride* when referring to generic events or the general concept of LGBTQIA+ pride.

## **pronouns**

Use this word and never *preferred pronouns*. Pronouns are who you are and are not a preference.

Also, use gender-neutral text whenever possible, for example:

- Instead of, *A resident should take out his or her recycling*, say, *Residents should take out their recycling*.
- Don't call groups of people *guys*. Good alternatives for addressing groups include: *colleagues, friends, folks, everyone*.

## **sexual orientation**

This is the accurate description of an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex and is inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, as well as straight men and women.

Use terms that are not offensive:

- Instead of saying *sexual preference*, say *sexual orientation*.
- Instead of *gay lifestyle*, say *gay lives*.
- Instead of *homosexual*, say *gay man, lesbian, gay person*.

## **transgender**

An adjective that refers to someone whose assigned sex at birth does not match their gender identity. Do not use *transgender* as a noun or use the term *transgendered*.

# ADDITIONAL TERMS

## **citizen**

We serve all community members, not just (U.S.) citizens. Avoid this term and use more inclusive language like *community member*, *community*, or *residents*.

## **City of Portland**

It is common to practice to capitalize *City of Portland* and *City* when referring to the City government. Do not capitalize *city* when referring to Portland as a geographic area or community. Refer to your communications team for guidance on your bureau's specific policy.

Some examples:

- *The City is holding free vaccination clinics for communities of color and City staff at Mill Ends Park.*
- *Community members are asking the City for a safer, more livable city.*

## **gentrification**

Gentrification has two components: investment and displacement. Investment is overwhelmingly in service of attracting or serving new, wealthier, white residents. Displacement is what happens when rising housing prices push out longtime, lower-income residents who are often people of color.

When writing about gentrification, avoid using it as a buzzword. Center displacement in the conversation, and the need for policies that promote equitable development and preserve affordable housing. Displacement is something with real impacts that can be prevented through policy and action, whereas gentrification can sound like a “natural” and unavoidable market process.

## **homelessness**

*Homelessness* is generally acceptable as an adjective to describe the experience of people without a fixed residence. Avoid the dehumanizing collective noun *the homeless*, instead, use people-first language: *people experiencing homelessness*, *people experiencing houselessness*, *people without housing*, or *people without homes*.

## **neurodiversity, neurodivergent, neurodiverse, and neurotypical**

*Neurodiversity* is the concept that differences in brain functioning such as *autism*, *dyslexia*, or *attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder* are normal variations, with strengths and weaknesses. It is not a medical term. Individuals or groups that exhibit those variations are considered *neurodivergent* or *neurodiverse*. The larger population is said to be *neurotypical*.

## Office of Equity and Human Rights

Use this name, not *OEHR*. You may also refer to the bureau as the *Office of Equity*.

Acronyms and jargon are words that only make sense to experts, City staff, and other specific groups of people. Avoid using specialized terms whenever you can. Instead, use simple terms that everyone can understand.

### older adult

Refrain from using words like *senior* and *elderly* when describing people of an older age, and instead use the term *older adult* when describing individuals aged 65 and over.

### pregnant people

Use this term when you want to be inclusive of people who have this experience but do not identify as women.

### suicide

Use the phrase *died by suicide*. Avoid the phrase *committed suicide*, which evokes associations with committing a crime or a sin. It also ignores the fact that suicide is often the consequence of an unaddressed illness like depression, trauma, or another mental health issue.

Also, if a story involves suicide, it is often advisable to place a warning at the beginning of the story so those who experience trauma around the subject are aware.

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Associated Press Style Guide

City of Oakland

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