Writing Inclusively

Writing **inclusively** means tailoring your language to ensure that audiences of all identities can understand you. It also means making sure that your language avoids **bias** or preconceived notions about people's identity.

This resource provides some general guidelines for writing inclusively. However, be aware that this is a very broad topic, and we cannot discuss everything there is to say about writing inclusively in such a short space. You may find the following links helpful for learning more about writing inclusively:

The APA's "General Principles for Reducing Bias": https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/general-principles

The APA's style guidelines for using bias-free language: https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/disability

Finally, as with all writing, you should consider your purpose, audience, and other elements of the **rhetorical situation** when deciding how to craft your message.

Avoid clichés and idiomatic expressions

These words and phrases are often very familiar to native English speakers, who know to take them metaphorically rather than literally. However, not all audiences will understand the meaning of these expressions, especially audiences who learned English as a second or foreign language. Revise these words and phrases so that you are using language that all audiences may clearly understand.

Examples:

Exclusive	Inclusive
Get the ball rolling	Begin, start
Beat around the bush	Avoid addressing the topic directly
Knock one out of the park	Do well, excel, succeed

For the same reason, avoid using visuals whose meaning does not translate across cultures. For example, while owls are considered a symbol of wisdom in American culture, other cultures associate them with death. Similarly, international audiences may not recognize certain road signs that appear in the United States. Be especially aware of color symbolism, as different colors are associated with different emotions depending on the culture.

Avoid gender bias

Be careful not to assume that certain positions are exclusively held by certain genders. Instead of using gendered pronouns, use the singular "they"/"them"/"their," or rewrite the sentence so that you no longer need a pronoun.

Examples:

Exclusive	Inclusive
Did you meet your doctor at his office?	Did you meet your doctor at their office?
Have the secretary submit her minutes.	Have the secretary submit the minutes.
Ask the nurse if she works tonight.	Ask the nurse if they work tonight.

Note: It used to be considered grammatically "correct" to default to masculine pronouns (he/him/his) when accounting for groups of people of mixed gender (example: Every student should bring his book to class.). However, it is now preferable to either use the singular "they"/"them"/"their" or rewrite the sentence to avoid using a pronoun. (example: Every student should bring their book to class. OR Students should bring the textbook to class.).

Avoid terms that assume a certain gender. Use gender-neutral alternatives instead.

Examples:

Exclusive	**Inclusive**	**Exclusive**	**Inclusive**
Fireman	**Firefighter**	**Businessman**	**Professional**
Waitress	**Waitstaff**	**Congressman**	**Representative**
Maiden name	**Family name**	**Chairman**	**Chair**
Manpower	**Power, strength**		

Be sensitive to gender identity

When referring to individuals, try to determine their pronouns so you know what pronouns to use when you refer to them. If you cannot determine an individual's pronouns, refer to the individual by name or rewrite the sentence so that you do not need to use a pronoun.

When addressing an individual, such as in a letter, avoid using language that assumes marital status. When addressing women, use "Ms." rather than "Mrs." or "Miss." Of course, if the person holds a doctorate or medical degree, use "Dr."

Defer to the term "partner" rather than "wife" or "husband" when referring to an individual's spouse, unless that individual uses "wife" or "husband" themselves.

Use bias-free language and avoid generalizing

Unless it is crucial to your meaning, avoid indicating a person's race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability/disability, marital status, religion/spirituality/belief system, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or any other aspects of their identity.

Examples:

Exclusive	**Inclusive**
Even though he is handicapped, he is a hard worker.	**He is a hard worker.**
Samantha's autism does not impede her ability to learn.	**Samantha is a quick learner.**
She achieved success despite being a high-school dropout.	**She achieved success.**

Be sensitive to labels

Disabled individuals may prefer **person-first language**, which emphasizes the person over the disability, or they may prefer **identity-first language**, which emphasizes the disability and allows individuals to reclaim it. Regardless, use language that respects individuals as human beings.

Examples:

Person-first language: Samantha is a person living with Asperger syndrome.
Identity-first language: Tom is a blind person.

Always avoid language that implies that an individual is limited or restricted by disability.

Examples:

Exclusive	**Inclusive**
Confined to a wheelchair	**Wheelchair user**
Suffering from alcoholism	**Person with alcohol use disorder**
Trauma victim	**Person living with trauma or trauma survivor**

Avoid language that reduces an individual to a label, unless that community/individual has reclaimed the label.

Examples:

Exclusive	**Inclusive**
The poor	**People experiencing poverty**
Addict	**Person with substance use disorder**

Avoid making assumptions about your audience's beliefs and attitudes

Skilled **rhetors** (persuasive writers/speakers) know how to play to their audience's beliefs and attitudes. However, avoid assuming that your audience feels or thinks a certain way, as this can severely damage your credibility.

Examples:

Exclusive	**Inclusive**
As we all know, the keto diet is the best.	**There are some advantages and disadvantages of keto.**
We can all agree that jazz is the best genre.	**Jazz is a unique genre with many compelling features.**
Any student will agree there's too much work.	**Some students have concerns about the work.**

Unless you are 100% sure about something, use **qualifying terms** like "some," "several," "a number of," and "often" rather than absolute terms like "all" and "always" and even milder terms like "most" and "usually."

Examples:

Exclusive	**Inclusive**
All first-year students struggle with classes.	**A number of first-year students struggle with classes.**
Taking supplements always improves health.	**Taking supplements often improves health.**

Make your writing accessible to all audiences

When possible, adapt your communication so that it is available across multiple **modalities**. Give your audiences all the tools they need to understand your communication. For example:

-Accompany any audio/visual texts with a written transcript and legible captions.

-For visual genres, use color combinations that do not impede readability for people with colorblindness. For example, it may be difficult or impossible for some to distinguish between some shades of red and green, so avoid using these colors together in visual representations of data (such as charts and graphs).

-Ensure that your document is accessible through a screen reader.

-Ensure that you are using a font style and size that is clearly legible to all audiences. For example, a font like Blackadder ITC (*Blackadder ITC*) may be difficult to read for some audiences.

Note: This resource was prepared with the assistance of the Cottey College Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee.