

TIPS FOR SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE WRITING

This handout addresses Southwestern’s Core Values of “Fostering Diverse Perspectives” and “Respecting the Worth and Dignity of Persons.” When you write, make sure you’re not alienating or excluding the perspectives of potential readers. Making blanket statements, speaking for others, and using outdated or exclusive language (even if it’s not technically profanity) may turn people off from paying attention to your argument. Below are some strategies to help writers avoid privileging certain perspectives over others.

BLANKET STATEMENTS AND SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

Blanket Statements: “Women are more empathetic than men,” or “people on welfare are lazy.”

Speaking for Others: “Since he voted for Trump, he is probably racist,” and “Mexicans care about family values.”

Both blanket statements and speaking for others are types of generalizations which are more common than you might think. Most blanket statements can’t be backed up with *recent* scholarly evidence, so make sure you can always cite recent claims with academic sources. Speaking for others can perpetuate racist, classist, or sexist, stereotypes.

Remember that no individual, not even you, can represent a larger community.

If you’re going to make a statement about a group of people, make sure you’re extremely specific and careful about the qualities being discussed. For example, “70% of Hispanic voters supported Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election,” is more accurate than “Hispanics are usually liberal.” **Focus less on predicting how people will act/think and more on understanding their perspective/position within society.**

In addition to avoiding generalizations, you should **pay attention to your word choice** especially when writing about issues of social difference. Below are some outdated and current terms to pay attention to when you write to be more inclusive.

RACE

Outdated	Current
Colored, caucasian, black (as a noun e.g., “those blacks”), Indian (to refer to Native-Americans), oriental	Person of color, white, African-American (as a noun), black (as an adjective), Native-American, Asian American or nation specific e.g., Chinese-America or Chinese
Mexican to refer to all Latinos	Mexican American, Chicano, Latina/o/x
Minorities	Non-whites, people of color

The word caucasian stems from outdated racial science; “white” is preferable. Colored is a term with a problematic history in the US; person of color, African-American, and black, are acceptable terms to refer to people of African ancestry. Oriental is outdated because it treats all people of east, south, southeast, and middle-eastern origins as the same.

Mexican-American is specific to latinx people who claim Mexican ancestry. In Texas, some students make the mistake of assuming latinx and Mexican-American are synonymous. They are not. The word Chicano/a refers to

people of Mexican heritage born in the US but not all Mexican Americans in the US embrace this label so be careful. Latina/o/x refers to people of Latin American ancestry living in the US.

The word “minorities” assumes but does not specify racial identification, colloquially, it means non-white, but whites are the minority racial group in a number of places. To refer collectively to people who are not white, terms that are used include “non-whites” and “people of color.”

CLASS

Outdated	Current
Lower class, poor, high class	Lower socioeconomic status, working class, higher socioeconomic status

Interestingly, middle-class is still used, but there’s a lot of debate about what level of wealth and income constitutes middle class. It’s helpful to refer to upper or lower middle-class if you have that information because middle-class alone can be vague to your reader.

ABILITY

Outdated	Current
Handicapped, differently-abled, disabled	Person with a disability

Person with a disability emphasizes that people who are disabled should not be defined by their physical or mental condition.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Outdated	Current
Homosexual	Gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual

The word homosexual stems from a psychiatric definition of same sex attraction as a disease which existed in the US until 1973. Gay, lesbian, and queer have been reclaimed by sexual minorities who have fought to affirm their identity.

Gender Identity: Do not assume someone uses he or she pronouns based on mere presentation! It’s really simple and non-offensive to ask someone, “what pronouns do you use?” They is always an acceptable pronoun.

EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Exclusive	Inclusive
“He” as a generic pronoun, “mankind” or “man” as a synonym for human, mailman, stewardess, fireman	They, people, person, mail carrier, flight attendant, firefighter

“He” as a generic pronoun and words like “mankind” or “man” as a synonym for “human” are all terms which push women out of academic discussions. This kind of language used to be the norm in academic writing but inclusive language uses human, humankind, people, they, and non-gender specific language for occupations instead.

FURTHER READING

For more information on inclusive language, check out these links:

RACE

Race Names - UW Madison

<https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/soc/racepoliticsjustice/2017/09/16/race-names/>

Readers Respond: Which Racial Terms Make You Cringe? - New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/02/us/racial-terms-that-make-you-tinge.html>

CLASS

“Poor” versus “low-income”? What term should we use? - Oxfam

<https://politicsofpoverty.oxfamamerica.org/2015/01/poor-versus-low-income-what-term-should-we-use/>

ABILITY

Removing Labels: Politically Correct Disability Terms - Bright Hub Education

<https://www.brighthubeducation.com/special-ed-inclusion-strategies/72076-correct-terms-for-students-with-disabilities/>

Guidelines to Terminology - Ability Magazine

<https://abilitymagazine.com/terminology3/>

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Glossary of Terms - Human Rights Campaign

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

Tips for Allies of Transgender People - GLAAD

<https://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>