

Guide to Inclusive Language: Race and Ethnicity

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APRIL 2022

I. About this Guide

This guide is for educational purposes only and should not be construed as legal advice. The D.C. Office of Human Rights (OHR) and the D.C. Office of Racial Equity (ORE) created this guide to provide examples and explanations, which are not intended to encompass all possible terms, definitions, or variations.

This guide will focus on the language our culture uses regarding **race and ethnicity**. Included below are some helpful definitions:

- **Race** is often defined as a social classification or association based on a person's ancestry, ethnicity, and perceived inherited physical characteristics (hair, skin color, etc.) (ex. White, Black, Asian, etc.).
- **National origin** is the state, country, or nation from which a person or their ancestors were born. (ex. A person born in Venezuela is Venezuelan).
- **Ethnicity** is a social construct that defines a set of people by their shared common cultures and traditions, including by not limited to race, nationality, or religion. (ex. Jewish, Japanese, Creole).

II. Understanding Racial Equity with ORE

Racial equity is both a process and an outcome.

- As a process: we apply a racial equity lens when those most impacted by structural racial inequity are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives.
- As an outcome: we achieve racial equity when one's race will no longer predict opportunities, outcomes, or the distribution of resources for residents of the District, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color residents.

III. Understanding Inclusive Language

Language is a powerful tool, both positive and negative, that allows us to communicate and understand the world around us. Because language is powerful, words can excite, inspire, oppress, divide, and much more. Choosing our words carefully matters because language can influence how we think, see the world, live our lives, and interact with others.

When it comes to interacting with others, it is important to remember that certain words might be considered prejudiced, offensive, and/or hurtful. This type of language is called **biased language**, which includes words or phrases that demean or marginalize people based on their gender, race, age, sexual orientation, class, disability, or any other aspect of their identity. **Biased language** may contain hidden messages based on outdated social norms and/or historical oppression, resulting in reinforced unconscious biases and stereotypes and furthered prejudice

and discrimination. Racially-, or ethnically-, biased language targets a person’s race or ethnicity and can include derogatory language, racial slurs, or jokes. While a word may not be personally offensive to you, it may be to others because of its racist or ethnic connotations.

Examples of racially or ethnically biased language can be found in **Table 1 and Table 3a**.

Inclusive language promotes **diversity, inclusion, equity,** and **equality**. **Diversity** includes all the ways in which people differ, encompassing the variety of skills, abilities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. **Inclusion** goes one step further by creating an environment where individuals or groups can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued. **Equality** is giving individual or groups the same resources or opportunities. **Equity** recognizes that individuals or groups have different circumstances, starting points, and opportunities, and therefore, provides necessary resources to reach an equal outcome. Unlike biased language, inclusive language acknowledges diversity; conveys respect to all people; is sensitive to differences; promotes equal opportunities; and is free from stereotypes, subtle discrimination, and negative messages. The benefits of inclusive language include allowing people to be their authentic selves; promoting effective communication; fostering a common understanding; and getting us closer to inclusion and equity.

Table 1: Examples of Racially or Ethnically Biased Language*

Word or Phrase	Why It Is Considered Problematic
Brown bag	Historically was a form of racial discrimination that involved comparing a Black person’s skin color to a brown paper bag. The test was used to accept or deny entry into certain clubs and organizations.
Grandfathered	Originated from a statute enacted by seven Southern states between 1895 and 1910 to deny suffrage to Black Americans.
Gypped	A derivative of Gypsy that was once used to stereotype Romani people as thieves. Romani people were discriminated against because of their darker skin and were enslaved in parts of Europe.
English native	May exclude a person who speaks English as a second language and implies that to be fluent, you must be a native of that country.
Minority	Has become a catch all phrase for those who are non-white. Unnecessarily defines people as lacking some quality that would place them in the majority. Will become inaccurate as national demographics change; currently, “minorities” constitute the global majority.
“No can do”	Originally emerged in the 19th century to mock Chinese immigrants’ speech patterns in English.
Spirit animal	Is considered cultural appropriative and disrespectful when used outside of the Indigenous community
Underserved	Refers to populations that face institutional barriers and systems that prevent them from receiving the adequate services or care; has become synonymous with poor.

**The meaning and use of some of these words have evolved overtime and are no longer used in the same context. However, it is important to know and understand the origin and history of the words you are using.*

IV. Best Practices and General Guidelines for Using Inclusive Language for Race and Ethnicity

Using **inclusive language** is important, particularly to people who have historically been excluded and marginalized. It *is not* the same thing as political correctness. Whereas political correctness focuses on not offending, inclusive language focuses on flexibility and connectedness while also honoring people’s identities. General guidelines for using inclusive language for race and ethnicity are included below. Examples of inclusive language to use more broadly around groups of people can be found in **Table 2**.

- Focus on the person, not their characteristics (person first language)
- Do not hyphenate nation origins (ex: African American not African-American); use of the hyphen was used in the late 19th to early 20th centuries to ridicule those who were not born in America
- Do not use adjectives as nouns (ex: Asian people not Asians or the Asians)
- Be sensitive to self-identification
- When in doubt, ASK
- Use universal phrases instead of idioms, industry jargon, and acronyms
- Ask yourself if race/ethnicity descriptor is necessary
- Be specific; do not hide behind vague words or generalizations
- Focus on strengths rather than deficits (ex: amplify voices rather than give voices)
- Be thoughtful about the imagery you use (ex: lazy, dirty, primitive, etc.)

Table 2: Examples of Inclusive Language for Groups

Terms to know	Explanation
BIPOC	Acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Recognizes that non-white people have different experiences and deal with different types of injustice. Opponents argue it establishes an “us” vs “them” binary
Marginalized	The institutional and system-based process where people are intentionally removed, denied, and isolated from economic, sociopolitical, and cultural participation. <i>Ex: Black trans women, senior citizens, persons with disabilities</i>
Underrepresented	Describes a subset of a population that holds a smaller percentage within a significant subgroup. <i>Ex: BIPOC women in STEM</i>

Table 3: Guidelines for Inclusive Language around Racial Groups in the United States

Table 3a provides explanations for each of the five racial categories defined by the United States Census Bureau (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White). Table 3a also provides examples of outdated or offensive biased language, along with guidelines for using related inclusive language. It may be noted that while some of the outdated and/or offensive terms and phrases are listed here, their use and acceptance may depend on the context in which they are used, the relationship and race, and/or ethnicity of both the speaker and the recipient. This *is not* a comprehensive list.

Table 3a: Guidelines for the Five Racial Categories

Explanation	Outdated Terms and Phrases	Offensive Terms and Phrases	Guidelines
American Indian or Alaska Native			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a range of words to describe themselves and prefer various descriptors be used by others • Native American and American Indian are terms created by white Americans 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squaw • Red • Redskins • Eskimos • Tribe (ex: “bride tribe”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a matter of personal preference (Native American vs. American Indian vs Indigenous; Canadian Indigenous people go by First Nations/People) • Respectful, general terms are Indigenous or First Nations/People • Indian by itself is generally not acceptable because it typically refers to people from India • When possible, preference is the use of a specific tribal name i.e., Pamunkey, Piscataway, Powhatan or for Alaska Natives, Inuit, Yupik, etc.
Asian or Asian American			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian is used when referring to people of Asian ancestry from Asia (Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Pakistan) • Asian American is used when referring to Americans of Asian descent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oriental (It may be considered offensive because it has been linked to old stereotypes an era of Asian exclusion by the U.S. government) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japs • Nip • Chinks • Chinaman • Slant eyes • Yellow • Paki (Pakistan) • Flip (Filipinos) • Towelhead (Middle Easterners) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on who you are referring to, use Asian or Asian American to refer to the population in its entirety • Otherwise, use more specific terms when referring to individuals or groups i.e., Japanese American, Chinese American, etc. • People from Central Asia or West Asia may not identify as Asian (ex. Pakistan)

Race	Explanation	Outdated Terms and Phrases	Offensive Terms and Phrases	Guidelines
Black or African American				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> African American refers to both descendants of enslaved persons in the US and African immigrants and their children Black is a term that may be used a sense of pride and empowerment; often used because of the unique Black experience in America, regardless of national origin African American and Black are typically not considered offensive, however they are not always interchangeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Afro-American Colored Mulatto Negro 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coon Crow Mammy Sambo Spook The other “N” word “Peanut gallery” “Cake walk” “Sold down the river” “Cotton picking tired” “Blacklist” “Boy” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Africa is a continent made up of 54 countries; Africans can be of any race Africans may not identify with Black or African American. The B in Black is always capitalized The use of Black or African American is a matter of personal preference Other alternatives may be American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) or Descendants of American Slaves (DAS) Individuals may also identify as Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino/a, etc. There are also offensive terms and phrases that may be associated with and/or used against African immigrants by Black Americans and vice versa 	
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Separated from people of Asian ancestry by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000 Recognized that Pacific Islanders have experienced and continue to experience unique struggles related to sovereignty and decolonization 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boonga Kanaka May include offensive Asian terms referenced above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Pacific Islander when referring to the population in its entirety Otherwise, use the preferred term of the individual or group 	
White				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> White or European American are acceptable 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cracker Honky Redneck Hillbilly Trash Hick 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American is not interchangeable with white Use of Caucasian is generally discouraged Where possible and appropriate, be specific about regional (Southern European, Scandinavian, etc.) or national (English, Irish, Italian, Polish etc.) origin The “w” in white is typically not capitalized There are also derogatory terms used for ethnicities/national origin (ex. Paddy or Mick for Irish; Gyped (Gypsies) 	

Table 3b Guidelines for Using Hispanic and Latino/a

Explanation	Outdated Terms and Phrases	Offensive Terms and Phrases	Guidelines
Hispanic and Latino/a			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not considered a racial category under the U.S. Census Bureau • Considered ethnicities because individuals can be of any racial group • Hispanic refers to Spanish speaking people, including people from Spain and excluding people from Brazil. • Latino/a (male and female respectively) refers to individuals from Latin American countries regardless of whether they speak Spanish. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spic • Greaser • Wetback • Beaner • Words related to “typical” Latino names or patronizing words (ex. Jose, Jefe) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic is rarely used outside the US; many people identify with their country of origin or ethnicity (ex: Colombian, Mexican, El Salvadorean, etc.) • Chicano/a is the chosen identity of Mexican Americans in the U.S. • When referring to a group, use LatinX as it is gender inclusive; note that this may not be a term that is widely used or accepted by the community as there is not full consensus about its use • Latine is another emerging gender-neutral descriptor

IV: Resources

For more information about inclusive language and/or race and ethnicity:

Read

- 2019. Guidant Global. [A Guide to Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#)
- 2020. Associated Press. [Explaining AP style on Black and white](#)
- 2020. HR Magazine. [How to cultivate inclusive language in the workplace](#)
- 2021. Columbia University. [What is Critical Race Theory?](#)

Watch

- 2015. Chescaleigh YouTube Channel. [Sometimes You’re a Caterpillar](#) (3 minutes)
- 2015. MTV Impact. [6 Phrases with Surprisingly Racist Origins](#) (5 minutes)
- 2019. TEDx Talks. [Eliminating Microaggressions: The Next Level of Inclusion](#) (9 minutes)

Listen

- The Diverse Minds Podcast, Ep. 37 [“Why bother with inclusive language?”](#) (13 minutes)