WRITING ABOUT RACE, ETHNICITY, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, AND DISABILITY

As language evolves alongside our understanding of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability, it is important for writers to make informed choices about their language and to take responsibility for those choices. Accurate language is important in writing about people respectfully and in crafting effective arguments your audience can trust. This handout includes writing practices and language tips to help you discuss various groups of people respectfully and without perpetuating stereotypes.

Best Practices

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," "people with disabilities" rather than "disabled people," and "enslaved peoples" rather than "slaves."

Don't use adjectives as nouns
Using adjectives as nouns is not only grammatically incorrect, it is often demeaning to the people you are describing. For example, use "Black people," not "Blacks."

Avoid terms that imply inferiority or superiority
Replace terms that evaluate or might imply inferiority/superiority with non-judgmental language. For example, use "low socioeconomic status" rather than "low class," or "historically marginalized population" rather than "minority."

Only note race, ethnicity, social class, or disability status when necessary and relevant
Mentioning these categories when they are not relevant is reductive and distracting. Make sure you include these descriptions only when discussing a particular identity. For example, only use "Dominican doctors" if you are specifically discussing Dominican people in that profession.

Be specific
When these descriptors are relevant, be as specific as possible to avoid inaccurate or generalized statements. For example, use "Dominicans" rather than "Hispanics," or "people who use wheelchairs" rather than "people with disabilities."

Writing about Race and Ethnicity
When writing about race and ethnicity, use the following tips to guide you:
- Capitalize racial/ethnic groups, such as Black, Asian, and Native American. Depending on the context, white may or may not be capitalized.
- Do not hyphenate a phrase when used as a noun, but use a hyphen when two or more words are used together to form an adjective. For example:
  - African Americans migrated to northern cities. (noun)
  - African-American literature. (adjective)
- The terms Latino/Latina/Latin are used mostly in the US to refer to US residents with ties to Latin America.

Umbrella Terms
- Avoid the term "minority" if possible. "Minority" is often used to describe groups of people who are not part of the majority. This term is being phased out because it may imply inferiority and because minorities often are not in the numerical minority. An alternative might be "historically

marginalized populations." If it is not possible to avoid using "minority," qualify the term with the appropriate specific descriptor: "religious minority" rather than "minority."

- Note that the terms "people of color" and "non-white" are acceptable in some fields and contexts but not in others. Check with your professor if you're uncertain whether a term is acceptable.

Writing about Socioeconomic Status

When writing about socioeconomic status, use the following tips to guide you:

- "Avoid using terms like "high class" or "low class," or even "upper class" or "lower class," because they have been used historically in an evaluative way. Also avoid "low brow" and "high brow." Instead, if you must incorporate adjectives like "high" or "low," use the term "high" or "low socioeconomic status" to avoid judgmental language.
- The word "status" (without the qualifier of "socioeconomic") is not interchangeable with "class" because "status" can refer to other measures such as popularity.
- When possible, use specific metrics: common ones include level of educational attainment, occupation, and income. Use specific language that describes what is important to the analysis.
- Be aware of numbers: there are no distinct indicators of "high" and "low," but there are percentages that make it easy to determine, via income bracket for example, where on a range an individual falls.

Writing about Disability

When writing about disability, use the following tips to guide you:

- Avoid negatively-charged language:
  - uses a wheelchair rather than confined to a wheelchair
  - diagnosed with bipolar disorder rather than suffers from bipolar disorder
  - person with a physical disability rather than physically challenged
- Do not use victimizing language such as afflicted, restricted, stricken, suffering and unfortunate.
- Do not call someone 'brave' or 'heroic' simply for living with a disability.
- Avoid the term "handicapped," as some find it insensitive. Note that it is widely used as a legal term in documents, on signs, etc.
- Do not use disabilities as nouns to refer to people. For example, use "people with mental illnesses" not "the mentally ill."
- Avoid using the language of disability as metaphor, which stigmatizes people with disabilities, such as lame (lame idea), blind (blind luck), paralyzed (paralyzed with indecision), deaf (deaf ears), crazy, insane, moron, crippling, disabling, and the like.
- Capitalize a group name when stressing the fact that they are a cultural community (e.g. Deaf culture); do not capitalize when referring only to the disability.

Referring to people without disabilities

Use "people without disabilities," or "neurotypical individuals" for mental disabilities. The term "able-bodied" may be appropriate in some disciplines. Do not use terms like "normal" or "healthy" to describe people without disabilities.

Writing with Outdated/Problematic Sources

When analyzing or referencing an outdated source, consider paraphrasing the quote or acknowledging that the author's language reflects the terminology of the time. Note that this does not apply to intentionally harmful and derogatory language, no matter how commonly it was used at the time.

When analyzing or referencing a source that uses harmful language (slurs, violent rhetoric, etc.), either:

- Explain that the author or character uses harmful language without stating it verbatim. For example: "The author uses an ableist slur when discussing [context of the quote], indicating that [analysis]."
- Acknowledge its offensive nature in your analysis if you must quote the harmful language verbatim.

Do not change the quote or omit harmful language without acknowledging it. If you must use outdated and problematic sources, it is best to acknowledge any harmful language or rhetoric and discuss how it impacts the use and meaning of the text in your analysis.

Note that if you do need to use dated terminology in discussing the subjects in a historical context, continue to use contemporary language in your own discussion and analysis.

If you are still unsure of what language to use after reading this, consult your professor, classmates, writing center tutors, or current academic readings in the discipline for more guidance.

As we have noted, language is complex and constantly evolving. We will update this resource to reflect changes in language use and guidelines. We also welcome suggestions for revisions to this handout. Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or suggestions.

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