

The Portable Editor

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Reducing bias in language is equally important as ensuring that your papers and manuscripts are grammatically correct and structurally sound. Because we all have our own cultural lens, we all have the potential of bringing a bias into our work. APA is committed to ensuring that all individuals and groups are treated fairly, and social work writing should demonstrate similar fairness and respect. In this issue of *The Portable Editor*, we present APA general guidelines—albeit not “rigid rules”—for reducing bias in language.

Describe at the appropriate level of specificity:

Eighteenth century writers decided that “he” and “men” referred to all people; of course, most 18th century writers were men, so they didn’t see a problem with that language. Today, most writers have adopted inclusive language and use “he or she” rather than gender-biased language, but “mankind” still pops up with alarming frequency. Whenever possible, you should use *precise, clear language* when referring to a person or a group. In other words, if a research study included both men and women, don’t neglect one gender for the other. When gender is relevant, be sure to use inclusive language or to refer to both genders. When gender isn’t relevant, APA recommends using gender-neutral language because the “she and he” and “hers and his” constructions can become awkward and distracting to the reader. If you can rephrase your writing to use plural nouns (e.g., participants, residents), then you can use gender-neutral pronouns such as *their, them, and they*. Alternatively, try rephrasing the sentence to replace the pronoun with a noun, such as “the person,” “the researcher, or “the agency director.”

Thankfully, language changes to accommodate changes in society. One ongoing change is the growing acceptance of “their” as a gender-neutral singular pronoun to avoid the often cumbersome “she or he” construction. Merriam-Webster indicates “their” is acceptable as a singular pronoun when the gender of the subject is unknown.¹ *For example, “Anyone in their right senses will agree with me.”* However, APA hasn’t gotten on board with this change—yet.

Using specific language is also important when discussing sexual orientation—note *orientation* is the preferred term rather than *preference*. Some interpret the term gay to refer only to gay men, while others interpret gay to mean gay men and lesbians—both of which are preferred over the clinical terms *homosexuals* or *homosexuality*, which can be associated with negative stereotypes and which reduce individuals’ identities to their sexual behavior.

Transgender is an *adjective* and should not be used as a noun. A transgender person describes an individual whose gender identity or gender expression differs from his or her sex at birth. Avoid adding the problematic -ed to transgender, which can cause grammar-tense confusion by turning the term into a verb, which it isn’t.

Specificity is **especially vital** when discussing racial and ethnic groups. For example, instead of describing all members of a group as “Hispanic Americans,” or “Asian Americans,” whenever possible, it is best to include the group with which the person identifies, which could be a country-of-origin or a cultural heritage (e.g., Cuban Americans or Chinese Americans). So rather than *Hispanic, Chicano, or Latino*, an individual from Guatemala may prefer, *Guatemalan*.

Both *Black* and *African American* are acceptable terms in APA style, just as the terms *American Indian* and *Native American* are both APA acceptable. The question should be which terms are acceptable to the people with whom you are working. To find the answer, ask! Although APA considers *Native American* to be the more inclusive term that encompasses native populations of Alaska and Hawaii, many in those groups prefer *Native Alaskans* and *Pacific Islanders*.

What do you do when reporting on literature that uses different terms? For example, one study uses Black and another uses African American. Preserve the authors' language in a quote, but otherwise use one term consistently in **your paper** to refer to a racial/ethnic group.

Keep in mind, racial and ethnic groups are proper nouns and should always be CAPITALIZED but **not** hyphenated. Avoid designations that are not parallel in construction:

- *Incorrect:* Blacks and Asian Americans
- *Correct:* African Americans and Asian Americans
- *Incorrect:* African Americans and Whites
- *Correct:* Blacks and Whites

Consideration should also be given when describing study participants' age. Some consider the terms *elderly* and *senior* as disparaging or dismissive nouns. Older person or older adult is preferred. Be specific when referring to ages. APA notes that *over* and *under* should not be used with ages – use *older than* and *younger than*. In addition, age values should be fully defined as years, months, or days. Even if you're reporting on alcohol use, it is not acceptable to simply write "*participants were older than 18 and younger than 65.*" List the age range as "*the study included individuals ages 18 to 65 years.*"

Be sensitive to labels/Avoid labeling:

Ask people what they prefer to be called! Assuming you know the answer may put you at risk of perpetuating a stereotype or including offensive language. In addition, ask often because preferences change over time.

Be mindful of the power of language. Many experts in the field of domestic violence prefer to use empowering language such as the term violence *survivor* rather than violence *victim* when discussing safety and recovery programs. However, these same experts may use violence victims when discussing the ongoing problem of domestic violence and the lack of prevention programs.

Labels can be problematic and should be avoided when discussing people with disabilities or mental disorders. Care must be taken not to emphasize and imply more identity and worth to an individual's disability or condition than to the person. Similarly, you must be sensitive to how you describe the comparison group and avoid labeling one group as "normal."

Examples: Referring to *people with schizophrenia*, rather than to *schizophrenics*.

Referring to the *learning disabled*, rather than to someone with *dyslexia*.

"This report compares outcomes of a group of children with developmental disabilities with the outcomes of a group of typically developing children."

Finally, remember, just because someone or some group is different doesn't mean that you must always point out those differences. Relevance matters!

Source: *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Sixth Edition*

¹ See video clip at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/video/0033-hisher.htm?&t=1330015437>

Need Writing Help?

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