

The logo for the City of Edmonton, featuring the word "Edmonton" in white text on a dark blue rectangular background.

Inclusive Language Guide

Diversity & Inclusion
Employee Services

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Language is dynamic and constantly evolving. As such, this document is iterative. If there are terms in this document that you think should be added or removed, please contact: diversityandinclusion@edmonton.ca

What is Inclusive Language?

The City of Edmonton is committed to a diverse, inclusive and respectful workplace. Language matters! Using inclusive language fosters respect, and helps everyone feel like they belong. Inclusive language avoids the use of words or expressions that exclude or insult specific groups of people, contribute toward stigma and discrimination, or are just plain offensive.

Is it just “political correctness”? No! Using inclusive language, or what some call being politically correct, is about being respectful. It’s about avoiding language and actions that insult, exclude or harm people who already experience marginalization and disadvantages, harassment and discrimination. It’s about being kind, and really, it costs you nothing to be kind.

Keep in mind that language changes over time. What was acceptable 10 years ago may not work now, and what is acceptable now may be considered derogatory in the future. It’s always the best bet, when possible, to ask someone how they want you to refer to them. Not every member of a group will agree on what to say.

This guide is not an exhaustive list of all words and phrases that can be harmful and exclusionary. We encourage you to learn more about inclusive language and the history or origins of the words and phrases. Please see the resource list for more information and do your own research if you’re unfamiliar or unsure about a specific word.

It’s OK to Make Mistakes

If you’re not sure about what kind of words to use when referencing people, this guide can help. It is not intended, however, to encourage or assume that perfection is possible. We will all make mistakes, and that’s ok.

If you do make a mistake, and someone lets you know, all you have to do is:

1. Apologize sincerely
2. Understand your mistake and how to avoid it in the future
3. Do your best to not make the same mistake again

Our differences are as important as our similarities. To have an inclusive workplace we need to be able to talk about difference. Respectfully.

Common Business Words and Phrases

Language changes and evolves and often we don't know the history of a word or phrase. Many common words and phrases we use everyday at work have offensive and harmful origins, such as linking to language related to times of slavery. Using universal phrases and avoiding idioms, jargon, and colloquialisms (even when they don't have harmful origins) creates a more inclusive environment for everyone and helps us communicate in a clear and accessible way.

This is not an exhaustive list. If you're unsure of the origin of a common word or phrase, you can google it to learn more.

Tips

- Ask yourself, "Do I know what this means? Where did this saying come from?"
- Consider if an English language learner or someone born outside of Canada will understand.
- Avoid terms that use the words black or white, as the meaning behind the word or phrase is often negative when black is used and positive when white is used.
- Consider if there may be problematic racial origins for a phrase (e.g. "grandfathered").

Don't Use	Use
Comments from the peanut gallery	Comments from people who aren't involved
Let's circle the wagons	Let's bring the team together and plan
Sold down the river	Betrayed, mislead
Blackout	Period of closure, shutdown
Blacklist/Whitelist	Block, denylist / allow, safelist
Own, e.g., "Who owns that policy?"	Who leads the policy? Who is responsible?
Master/slave (Technology) Master list Master Bedroom	Primary/Secondary or Controller/Agent Primary List/Final List Main Bedroom/Primary Bedroom
That's a cakewalk	That's easy
They drank the kool-aid	They believe in that without questioning, facts or information
Grandfathering/Grandfather clause	Legacy, exempted, excused, preapproved, preauthorized, or legacied

¹ <https://practicallesg.com/2021/07/say-this-instead-grandfathering/>

Gender

Gender is not binary (i.e. not just man and woman), but a continuum. It is a social and cultural construct; and it refers to a societal role, not one's assigned sex. Trans and transgender refers to gender identity, not to sexual orientation. Personal pronouns should be used as requested, e.g. she/her, they/them, he/him. There are a variety of terms people may use to describe their gender identity, including²:

Agender	Gender Fluid	Neutrois
Androgyne	Gender Neutral	Non-Binary
Bi-Gender	Gender Non-Conforming	Poly Gender
Genderqueer	Gender Variant	Third Gender
Gender Diverse	Intergender	Two-Spirit(ed)

Tips:

- Use gender neutral terms and phrasing.
- Avoid terms that show gender bias in a profession (e.g. "fireman"), as well as terms intended to be neutral, but in fact are gender-specific (e.g. "guys").
- Use terms of equal status, and avoid terms that suggest gender inferiority (e.g. "folks" or "friends" instead of "guys" or "girls").

Don't Use	Use
Each employee should read his or her packet carefully	Employees should read their packets carefully
Invite your boyfriend or wife	Invite your spouse or partner
Cleaning lady, policeman, fireman, chairman	Cleaner, police officer, firefighter, chair
Man and wife, girls in the office	Husband and wife, staff/women in the office
Hey guys	Hey folks, people, everyone, y'all
Manpower/man the booth/man hours	Workforce or personnel/ staff the booth/working hours
Girls (over 18 years old)	Women
Grandfathering/Grandfather clause	Legacy, exempted, excused, preapproved, preauthorized, or legacied

² <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/careers/all-employees/working-with-others/words-matter.pdf>

Inclusive Salutations

Incorporating inclusive language practices is important in a world which relies on written forms of communication. Try to adopt gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language to avoid the consequences of bias or discrimination.

This is not an exhaustive list. If you're unsure of whether a salutation or word is gendered, you can google it to learn more.

Tips^{3 4}

- Use gender inclusive language when the gender is unknown
- Use gender inclusive language when addressing individuals who do not identify with a gender binary (man or woman)
- Use gender inclusive language when addressing a diverse group
- Adopt the use of gender-neutral nouns
- Adopt the use of gender-inclusive pronouns

Don't Use	Use
Ms. or Mr. <i>Dear Mr. Quader,</i> <i>Dear Ms. Quader,</i>	Omit the courtesy title First Name Last Name; or First Initial Last Name <i>Dear Alex Quader,;</i> or <i>Dear A. Quader,</i>
Sir or Madam <i>Dear Sir,</i> <i>Dear Madam,</i>	First Name Last Name; or First Initial Last Name <i>Dear Alex Quader,;</i> or <i>Dear A. Quader,</i>
Landlord or Landlady <i>Dear Landlord,</i> <i>Dear Landlady,</i>	Property Owner <i>Dear Property Owner,</i>
Councilman or Councilwoman <i>Dear Councilman Ross,</i> <i>Dear Councilwoman Ross,</i>	Councillor <i>Dear Councillor Ross,</i>

³ [Making letters and emails gender-inclusive – Our Languages blog](#)

⁴ [Tips for Writing Gender-Neutral Emails - BusinessWritingBlog](#)

Indigenous Peoples

As a commitment to reconciliation, using language that more accurately reflects Indigenous people is important. There are three distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: First Nations, Métis and Inuit. “Indigenous Peoples” is commonly used as a collective term for all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. “Indigenous people” with a lowercase “people” is simply referring to more than one Indigenous person rather than the collective group of Indigenous Peoples. If a person is working with a specific group that identifies as First Nations, Inuit or Métis they are encouraged to use the more specific name rather than the broader term.

Tips:

- “Native Peoples” is a collective term to describe the descendants of the original people of North America. The term is increasingly seen as outdated.
- The term “First Nation(s)” is widely used and has for the most part replaced the term “Indian.” “First Nations People(s)” refers to both status and non-status individuals but excludes Métis and Inuit people. “First Nation” has also been adopted to replace the word “band” in some communities.
- Indigenous Peoples come from different nations with separate languages, cultures and customs and should not be referred to as a homogenous group. The specific nation, community, or band should be used when possible.
- Avoid vocabulary and usage that carries hierarchical valuation, describes Indigenous Peoples as ‘belonging’ to Canada, and other usages that may denote inferiority.
- Cultural objects and ceremonies have specific sacred meanings and uses unique to Indigenous Peoples and should be used only in that context.

Don't Use	Use
Canada's Indigenous people	Indigenous Peoples in Canada (or Turtle Island)
Natives, Indians, Aboriginals, Eskimo(s)	Indigenous Peoples First Nations, Métis, Inuk (Inuit is plural)
Low man on the totem pole	Person with the least seniority
Let's have a pow-wow	Let's meet and discuss

Gender, Sexual and Romantic Minorities (GSRM / 2SLGBTQ+)

2SLGBTQ+ stands for: two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and plus (other identities).

GSRM stands for gender, sexual and romantic minorities. It is a useful acronym when trying to be inclusive of the many identities in this community which are not represented by 2SLGBTQ+.

Heterosexism is the beliefs and practices that assume heterosexuality is the only natural, normal and acceptable sexual orientation. With it comes the common assumption that everyone is straight—until proven otherwise. It is best not to assume that someone is heterosexual.

Homophobia is a fear or misunderstanding of homosexuality and GSRM people, often expressed by offensive, discriminatory language and actions. *Transphobia* is specific to transgender people.

Tips:

- Avoid defaulting to umbrella terms like 'gay' or 'homosexual.' Use GSRM to refer to a broad community or be specific when relevant: lesbian, gay man, bisexual woman, etc.
- 'Sexual orientation' is the appropriate term over 'sexual preference' or 'lifestyle choice' (which suggests a degree of voluntary choice that is not necessarily the case).
- Be mindful of appropriate and respectful in-group versus out-group naming. 'Queer' is an acceptable in-group term but it is often better to refer to 'queer communities' rather than calling an individual 'queer' unless they have already indicated that this is how they identify.

Don't Use	Use
Transgendered, Tr-nny, Transvestite	Transgender, trans
Homosexual, F-g, D-ke	Gay or lesbian, GSRM or 2SLGBTQ+
Gay marriage	Marriage
Lifestyle	Sexual orientation
That's so gay	That's ridiculous
The gay community (unless you are only referring to gay people)	The 2SLGBTQ+ community GSRM Community

Physical and Mental Health

Disabilities can be visible, invisible, and episodic. While in most circumstances there will be no need to refer to a person's disability, if the need does arise, choose acceptable terminology for the specific disability or use the term preferred by the individual. One person with a visual disability may prefer 'blind' while another person with a similar disability may prefer "person with low or limited loss of vision."

Tips:

- Use person-first language which puts the person before the disability, unless they've expressed otherwise (see the resource section for more information on person-first and disability first language). E.g. an individual who lives with schizophrenia
- In some cases, identity-first language (which is rooted in the relationship between a personal-cultural identity and a disability) is preferred. Individuals and groups who use it as part of their identity focus on the unique ability rather than the disability. E.g autistic person, deaf person⁵
- Use language that emphasizes abilities rather than limitations
- Avoid negative or value-laden terms that overextend the severity of a disability
- Do not label people by their disability
- Do not use words that contribute to the stigma of mental health

Don't Use	Use
Terry, who uses a wheelchair, is new to the department and has expressed an interest in taking on this project.	Terry is new to the department and has expressed an interest in taking on this project.
Disabled person, physically challenged or crippled	Person with a disability
Confined to a wheelchair/wheelchair bound	Jamila uses a wheelchair for mobility
Marcy suffers from epilepsy	Marcy is living with epilepsy
That's so lame/dumb	That's so boring/uninteresting
We were blind to the consequences / blindspot	We didn't anticipate the consequences / gap
Handicapped washroom/parking	Accessible washroom/parking
My workload is crazy/insane/mental/bonkers right now or my workload is crippling me	My workload is super heavy right now
He's so r-t-rded (or anything that ends with "tard" - e.g. libtard)	He's so ignorant/narrow-minded/reckless
They committed suicide.	They died by suicide

⁵ [language_matters_cheat_sheet_eng.pdf](#)

Race and Ethnicity

Race is a social construct, it is not biological. Someone who is considered Black in one country might be considered White in another. Black and White are often capitalized when talking about race as they are often used as group designations and proper nouns. Capitalization also helps to underscore the political nature of these words and the tenuousness of their meaning. The term Black person is acceptable in Canadian and American context. In Western Canada, African Canadian is rarely used, and in the United States, African American is shifting to Black to be a more inclusive term for the Black diaspora.

Tips:

- Capitalize the proper names of nationalities, peoples, and race: Indigenous Peoples, Arab, French-Canadian, Inuit, Jew, Latin, Asian, Cree.
- Avoid references that draw undue attention to ethnic or racial backgrounds. When references are valid, learn the most appropriate specific terminology or use the term preferred by the person or group concerned.
- When it is necessary to describe people collectively, the term “racialized person/person who is racialized” or “racialized community” is preferred, as these terms express race as a social construct and do not promote broad “other than white” categorizations.
- Racialized groups include people who might experience differential treatment on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, religion or culture.
- Using “minority” may imply inferior social position and is often relative to geographic location. When needed, the use of “member of a minority ethnic group” is preferred over “minority group”.
- Avoid using the term “caucasian” as it refers to a racist categorization of people by physical characteristics. It’s generally ok to say “Brown”, “Black”, “White”, but it is best to ask a person how they would like to be referred to.

Don't Use	Use
Oriental	Asian people
Mixed race people, mulatto	Biracial people, multiracial individuals
Caucasian	White, European Canadian
He g-pped me, jewed me down	He ripped me off
Third world country, developing country	Low-income economy/middle-income economy/high-income economy

Age

Age can be a sensitive subject, and it is important to be respectful when discussing age. Both older and younger people may perceive their age as a systemic barrier to their full inclusion in the workplace. Keep in mind that, for most situations, it is unnecessary to refer to someone's age. If it is necessary, it is best to discuss the specific age without any negative connotations or attributions.

Inappropriate language can target people of any age. Avoid language that stereotypes or implies that a particular age group is more or less able. Referring to an age group can carry unintended meaning or stereotype them. The term "elderly" can imply a stereotype, and should be used with caution.

An exception to negative connotations around the descriptor "elderly" is in the case of Indigenous Peoples where the term "Elder" is considered an honoured title for someone who holds both age and wisdom. First Nations, Métis and Inuit elders are acknowledged by their respective communities as an "elder" through a community selection process. Gender and predetermined age are not factors in determining who is an elder in Indigenous communities.

Tips:

- Avoid lumping entire generations of people together. Each generation is composed of unique individuals, experiences, and perspectives. Conversely, members of different generations can have a lot in common with each other.

Don't Use	Use
The elderly, old people, aged	Older person, people, older citizens, older adults
A young and diverse team	An effective and diverse team
Youths	Young people, youth
10 years experience is required	Proven experience is required
Those Zoomers/Millennials/Gen Xers/Baby Boomers...	People born between...

References and Resources

- ❑ Canadian Association for the Deaf [resource](#) for language specific to the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing communities
- ❑ [Words Matter: Guidelines on using inclusive language in the workplace](#), BC Public Service
- ❑ [An Ally's Guide to Terminology; Talking About LGBT People & Equality](#), GLAAD.org
- ❑ [Here](#) is a blog with examples of ableist language
- ❑ [Inclusive Language](#), University of Victoria
- ❑ [LGBTQ-Inclusive Language Dos and Don'ts](#) The Safe Zone Project
- ❑ [The Radical Copyeditor's Style Guide For Writing About Transgender People](#), radicalcopyeditor.com
- ❑ [Racist Language and Origins I didn't Always Know](#) JD Supra
- ❑ [I am Disabled: On Identity-first vs Person-first Language](#) Cara Liebowitz. Thebodyisnotanapology.com
- ❑ [Tips for Writing Gender-Neutral Emails - BusinessWritingBlog](#) Julie Maddock.
- ❑ [Making letters and emails gender-inclusive – Our Languages blog](#). Government of Canada.