How to use inclusive language in writing

Academic writing should be inclusive, free from biased language that could cause offence. Instead you should use language that is clear, objective and stereotype-free. Biased language can occur in particular in the areas of:

- gender
- sexual orientation
- racial or ethnic identity
- disability
- age

The American Psychological Association’s Publication Manual is a good source of help (see reference at the end of the help-sheet).

Use an appropriate level of specificity
Irrelevant information should be avoided. You should use an appropriate level of detail e.g. if the gender, age, disability, sexuality or ethnic identity of the person/people you are discussing is not relevant, then don’t mention it. e.g. the Chinese lecturer – is the race or ethnic identity of the lecturer relevant to what you are saying? If not then just call them the lecturer.

Be sensitive to labels
If possible, call people what they prefer to be called. Language and acceptability changes over time, so what might have been okay to use 10 years ago, may not be now.
A useful rule is to put the person first, so rather than write ‘schizophrenics’, use ‘people with schizophrenia’.

Gender
Bias in gender can occur when pronouns like he are used when you could be referring to anyone. You should also avoid using names for occupations that assume only one sex can do that job e.g. policeman can be replaced with police officer.
Where possible, you should avoid using specific pronouns when discussing people e.g. ‘A nurse should reflect on her practice’ would be better as ‘Nurses should reflect on practice’

Transgender refers to people who identify as a different gender than their assigned sex at birth. Some transgender people identify as transsexual if they live as their preferred gender. They may also be receiving medical help to change to that preferred gender. Always refer to a transgender/transsexual person with the pronoun they identify with e.g. he or she

Sexual orientation
The term sexual orientation refers to a person’s attraction to others and should always be used rather than sexual preference, which assumes that this is voluntary. Lesbian, gay men and bisexual should be used rather than homosexual.
Racial and ethnic identity
Terminology for racial and ethnic identity change regularly. This is partly due to personal preference. It can also be because terms can become dated or be used negatively. Using the term *ethnic minority* can be acceptable, but if possible use a more specific term e.g. *African-Caribbean* or nationality e.g. *Mexican*. Avoid describing someone as a colour e.g. black or white. Use a more specific term.

Disabilities
When writing about people with disabilities, avoid language that makes the person their condition e.g. epileptics and put the person first e.g. *person with epilepsy*.
Also avoid terms that have negative connotations e.g. Aids victim or person suffering from heart failure. Again, put the person first e.g. *person with AIDS* or *person with heart failure*.

Age
Where it is appropriate, be specific about age, for example when talking about participants in research. If it not relevant then avoid discussing age.
*Older people* is preferable to the elderly as this can be seen negatively.
Children under 12 can be referred to as *boys* and *girls*.
13-19 year olds can be referred to as *adolescents* or *teenagers*.
People over 18 are *women* and *men*, not girls and boys.

References