



Promoting inclusive language: an incomplete guide

As a part of EGU's commitment to promote inclusivity and accessibility in the geosciences, we have started a guide to various terms and phrases that we would like our members to try and use differently, in order to create a safe space for everyone associated with EGU. Although this document is in its infancy, which is why we have called it an 'incomplete guide,' we hope that it will spark a broader conversation around how to make everyone who is interested in the geosciences feel welcome and included.

It is an unfortunate reality that sexist, homophobic, transphobic or ableist attitudes can be conveyed, often unintentionally, through language. This can be a challenging thing for us to change about ourselves as this kind of language may be so familiar that it takes a conscious effort for us to realise it is problematic and to find and use alternatives. In this sense, EGU is not talking about the explicit hate speech connected to gender, gender identity, sexuality, race, religion or ability that is defined in our code of conduct. That kind of language is unacceptable in our Union and will not be tolerated. Instead here we are focusing more on language that is less obvious, but can still be hurtful.

In this context, it's important to always remember: communication is not what you say, but rather what is heard.

Gendered language:

Gendered language is language that assumes the male default and is harmful as it perpetuates subconscious perceptions that certain roles or spaces are only for men. Many of these terms are easily identified and related to careers, but it is useful to think about how gendered language is commonly used in the geosciences.

Here are some examples of gendered language and alternative suggestions for those terms:

- Dear Sir/Madam – **Dear reader/colleague**
- Unmanned – **uncrewed**
- Manpower – **workforce/personnel**
- Mankind – **humanity**
- Chairman – **chair/chairperson**
- Middleman – **go-between**
- Ladies and gentlemen – **respected guests**
- Housekeeping – **maintenance/clean up**
- Guys – **everyone/folks/people** (guys is not a gender-neutral term; it assumes the universal experience is male)

It is also worth noting that gendered language can often just be omitted rather than requiring an alternative.



'Benevolent' sexism, the idea that men and women have traditional gender roles and deserve approval for performing those roles, is still a type of sexism. It can be particularly harmful as it often reinforces the perception that female-presenting persons are weak, and male-presenting persons are strong. A common example of benevolent sexist behaviour can be seen in men opening doors for women, but refusing to walk through a door opened for them by a woman. An example of benevolent sexist language would be congratulating a man for performing basic childcare responsibilities, but not complimenting a woman for the same. The problem with this type of sexism isn't in the compliment, but rather the sexist way it is framed.

Pronouns:

Pronouns are how you refer to someone without using their name, for example 'Michael is about to present **his** poster'. It is not appropriate to assume which pronouns a person uses based on their external appearance. If you don't know a person's pronoun, it's respectful to use a gender-neutral one, like 'they', for example 'Michael is about to present **their** poster.'

Pronouns are important because they are a part of a person's identity, so when someone *intentionally* uses the wrong pronouns for another person, that is considered an act of exclusion and often of aggression. If you are a cis-gendered person (a person whose gender identity aligns with that assigned to them at birth), then you may not have had to experience being addressed with the wrong pronoun, but it is important to be considerate of people with a different gender identity.

If a person tells you their pronouns, it is important to use them!

If you find using 'they' as a singular pronoun unusual, it can be helpful to remember that this type of pronoun use is quite common when you don't know the gender of a person you are discussing, for example: 'where did the student leave their poster?' If you practice using 'they' in the singular, it quickly becomes easy to do. It is also much easier to use 'they' instead of the more complicated 'he/she' when referring to someone whose gender is unknown.

Everyone makes mistakes, so if you accidentally use the wrong pronoun for someone, it is important to apologise, correct yourself and move on. Please be careful that this doesn't become a habit though as one mistake is understandable, but regular mistakes are just as disrespectful and offensive as intentionally using the wrong pronoun.

Disability and the person-first vs identity-first discussion:

Following the publication of our first guide, we were made aware of an extension to the guide that we need to consider through some great online discussion; the difference between person-first and identity-first language when talking about disability, mental health and chronic illness. Person-first language is based in the idea that the person should be placed before their disability,



but for many people their disability or mental health diagnosis is a part of their identity and should be described that way, such as Deaf people or autistic people.

So which way is best? Well the short answer is to ask the person you are talking about if they prefer to be described as, for example, a person with a disability or a disabled person, when you are not just using their name.

Other things to bear in mind when talking about disability:

- Be wary of describing people by their diagnosis; use 'has dyslexia' rather than 'is dyslexic'. This is a person-first approach and can often be a good place to start a discussion. However, similar to describing disability more broadly, the person with this diagnosis may choose to describe themselves differently - that is their choice.
- When speaking about disabilities in general, avoid phrases that suggest victimhood, e.g., 'confined to a wheelchair' or 'suffers from'. A common failing of language is to frame disability as abnormal, such as describing a person without a disability as 'healthy' or 'normal'.
- Try to use language that acknowledges neurodiversity and avoid using derogatory language about mental illness such as 'schizo', 'nuts' or 'psycho'. Similarly try not to use terms of mental illness inappropriately, such as 'OCD' or 'bipolar', as these are real psychiatric disabilities and not metaphors for behaviour.

Other ways language can be more inclusive:

There are many other forms of exclusive language, including homophobic and ableist language, that we can be more proactive and thoughtful about to avoid causing discomfort to our diverse membership. Here are just a few examples of other types of exclusive language to be aware of:

- Using language that describes husbands and wives can be exclusive for a number of different reasons. If you are talking about this topic, it is far better to use a term such as 'partner' or 'family'.
- Similarly, try to use the inclusive term 'parent' rather than 'father' or 'mother' as this not only makes assumptions about the gender of the parent or partner, but is exclusive to diverse families where other family members than biological parents fulfil a parenting role.
- Language-based gatekeeping is a form of exclusion that many people may not be aware that they are doing. The perceived need of certain minorities, particularly racial or regional minorities, to change their speech patterns in order to fit in can come from being told by language-based gatekeepers that they don't talk 'properly' or 'appropriately' for a situation. This is actually a form of exclusion.

Please feel free to suggest any other examples of gendered or exclusive language you find to us so we can continue to expand this document – and this important conversation.



Other resources:

1. University of Colorado, Boulder, Pronoun Guidance: <https://www.colorado.edu/cisc/resources/trans-queer/pronouns>
2. Stonewall, Tackling Homophobic Language: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/tackling_homophobic_language_-_teachers_guide.pdf
3. National Centre on Disability and Journalism, Disability Language Style Guide: <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>
4. Autism Europe, Acceptable Language: <https://www.autismeurope.org/about-autism/acceptable-language/>
5. Flinders University, Discrimination and Harassment (scroll down for an inclusive language guide): <https://staff.flinders.edu.au/employee-resources/working-at-flinders/equal-opportunity/discrimination-and-harassment>
6. European Parliament, Gender Neutral Language in the European Parliament: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf
7. Time to Change, Mind Your Language: <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/media-centre/responsible-reporting/mind-your-language>
8. Karen Catlin (2019) Better Allies: everyday actions to create inclusive, engaging workplaces, Better Allies Press, ISBN: 1732723311
https://books.google.de/books/about/Better_Allies.html?id=hFV_vwEACAAJ&redir_esc=y
9. People with disability, Australia: Identity-first vs person-first language
<https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/language-guide/identity-vs-person/>
10. The myth of "proper English" by Oliver Kamm
<https://www.thearticle.com/the-myth-of-proper-english>