



Inclusive, Respectful Language: Top 20 Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why does thinking about language matter?

A: The words we choose and the language we use have the power to affect the people and the world around us. Our words represent our beliefs, morals, prejudices, and principles—sometimes in ways that we may not intend—and can shape an audience’s perceptions of us as well as the issues about which we speak and write. In other words, the words you use are a reflection of you and will affect how others perceive you. At the individual level, language affects how we engage with people in personal encounters on a daily basis; however, at an institutional, systemic, and policy level, language can affect the lives of communities and populations for generations.

Q: Why should I care about inclusive and respectful language?

A: Our language can dramatically impact the feelings, perceptions, and thoughts of those with whom we engage—including our family, friends, colleagues, employers, etc. Our words can communicate compassion as easily as they can create harm and it is important to consider intentions do not always align with impact—but choosing our words with care can help ensure that what we say is less likely to be misconstrued. Just as you would want someone to speak to you or about you in a respectful manner, it’s important to offer others the same courtesy.

Q: Is using inclusive and respectful language important for daily life?

A: This is an important question—one that I frequently pose to others when I facilitate language discussions. I often find that others will acknowledge that inclusive, respectful language may be important for some people (for instance, for writers, spokespersons, and other communications professionals) but not for everyone. However, I would suggest that inclusive language is an important part of daily life inasmuch as interacting with other human beings is a part of daily life. Any time you engage with others—whether you are chatting with a family member, texting a friend, emailing a coworker, or posting on social media—you are using language, and that language may be inclusive and respectful or not.

Q: How does my experience and identity affect my language?

A: Despite our best efforts, our communication is infrequently neutral and the language we use almost always builds upon a variety of personal experiences that have influenced us as individuals. The words we have heard repeated by family, friends, teachers, colleagues, the media, etc. have all affected our thinking to some degree. Therefore, confronting our personal experiences, identities, perceptions, and privileges is a critically necessary component, albeit oftentimes disconcerting



endeavor, as we work to unlearn and re-learn how to be inclusive and respectful with our words.

Q: Why should I have to use certain language when I have different beliefs—for example if I believe that gender is determined by biology, why do I have to use language that is respectful of trans people?

A: While we all have different beliefs, a common belief for most of us, at least I hope, is the importance of being respectful of others. And again, just as you would want someone to speak to you or about you in a respectful manner, it's important to offer others the same courtesy. It may also be worth mentioning, you do not have to express every opinion or thought you have. However, if you feel the need to express your beliefs, knowing that doing so may make others uncomfortable or may hurt someone's feelings, that is your choice. It is important to remember, though, that while you have the freedom to express your views, there may be consequences to your actions—including potentially losing a friend or even losing a job.

Q: Can you just give me a list of things not to say and what to say instead?

A: The idea of “correct” and “incorrect” or “right” and “wrong” would certainly make things easier, but unfortunately, that is not how language works—language is simply too complex. First, language is always evolving; over time, new words gain popularity, antiquated words are renounced or rescinded, and the meaning of words can change. The word “queer” is an interesting example; while the term originated in the early 1500s, it was not until the late 1800s that it was first recorded as a slur—with negative connotations that continued until the late 1900s when activists reappropriated the term. Further, when we are talking about people, the affected population's preferences should take precedence (although this does not always occur) and individual preferences may contradict group norms and standards. For instance, while many in the autistic community prefer being referred to as being “an autistic person,” some prefer “a person with autism”—and you cannot know a person's preference without asking. But perhaps most importantly, the concept of absolutes perpetuates the idea that being inclusive and respectful is a simple, impersonal task, when the exact opposite

is true: language is deeply personal. Respecting actual people, as individuals and equals, is more important than respecting the rules, even the most well-intentioned ones.

Q: How do I talk about a person if I don't know the specifics about them—their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or whatever?

A: I think there are two issues to unpack with this question. The first is: does knowing the specifics—age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.—about the person matter in context? For instance, would referring to a person as “my colleague” or “another student” suffice for your purposes or is saying “a young woman I work with” or “a gay guy in my class” necessary? In some cases, highlighting these characteristics may be relevant—in other cases, not so much. After establishing that knowing and disclosing this information is relevant, we can think about how to gather the information—respectfully. If you are authentically interested in learning and are courteous in your pursuit, you may find that asking the person directly can facilitate fascinating conversations. As with many questions related to language, respect is critical and considering the impact of how we frame our questions is paramount. Carelessly asking personal questions can easily be perceived as othering—the implication and insinuation being: I think you are different, and by different, I mean inferior. However, carefully explaining that you wish to be considerate of their identity or situation may foster a favorable connection. For example, you might simply say: “What are your pronouns? I want to be sure I [introduce you to my friend, quote you in my paper, etc.] appropriately.”

Q: What if I make a mistake?

A: Mistakes happen. Whereas language is constantly evolving, mistakes are the constant. I make mistakes; everyone you know has and will inevitably continue to make mistakes. And, even when we try our best, we may still find ourselves making mistakes. Mistakes are a part of unlearning and learning—and accepting your mistakes and committing to improving are important pieces of the process. If you find yourself making a mistake, I recommend addressing the mistake with three simple steps: (1) acknowledge the mistake, (2) sincerely and swiftly apologize, and (3) commit

to doing better in the future. I would also caution against overcompensating or prompting others to offer forgiveness, which can prolong and worsen the discomfort for everyone; complete the three steps and move on. In the end, no one is perfect, just as language is imperfect, and the only true failure is the refusal to learn and improve—and we can all improve if we are willing to be honest, humble, and thoughtful, even when it's difficult.

Q: What if I hear or see someone else making a mistake?

A: Acting when you hear or see someone else making a mistake related to inclusive and respectful language can be challenging and approaches may vary, depending on the individual person and individual situation. Overall, I think it is worth pausing to remember that we are all works-in-progress and to avoid assuming malicious intent. Beginning any conversation with this mindset can help us in delivering a critique in a way that will ideally result in a productive, rather than confrontational, conversation. You might also consider how you would hope someone would correct you. In some cases simply saying “sorry to interrupt, but X term is considered disrespectful, Y term is used now instead” or “you may not be aware, but that person uses they/them pronouns” in the moment may be appropriate. In other cases, privately approaching a person and explaining that their language was problematic and suggesting how they could improve may work better—ideally, they will understand you are trying to help and find the correction useful.

Q: What if someone uses language that makes me upset or uncomfortable?

A: Inclusive and respectful language is often coupled with sensitive and sometimes complex issues, which can evoke various emotions, such as anger, frustration, loneliness, sadness, stress, and more. Feeling uncomfortable with what you hear someone say or when you read what someone has written can sometimes be a sign of language that may be (consciously or unconsciously) exclusionary or derogatory. If you can immediately identify the language that has made you uncomfortable and have the ability in the moment to address the situation, you may consider respectfully correcting the person—for instance, “I am uncomfortable with you using X term and would ask you to use Y term

instead.” If you are too overwhelmed in the moment, you may need to remove yourself from the situation—step away from the conversation, close out the social media post, etc.—at least temporarily, and then decide if you have the capacity to address the person later.

Q: What if something I say causes an emotional response?

A: The words we use, particularly when discussing sensitive issues, can evoke various emotions. If you see a person (or persons) becoming uncomfortable with what you are saying, this could be a sign that your language may be—consciously or unconsciously—disrespectful. If you know that you have made a specific mistake, consider acknowledging and apologizing for the mistake and correcting yourself. If you are unsure of what you may have said to provoke the emotional response, you may wish pause and ask if someone would mind explaining if you have said something disrespectful or you may decide that it would be best to follow up with the person later, respectfully, in private. However, be mindful that the other person may not wish to discuss the issue and you should respect their right not to assume this emotional labor. But remember, we all make mistakes and we can all improve—offer yourself grace and then practice doing better!

Q: What if someone calls me out or tells me I did something wrong?

A: Being “called out,” “called in,” or criticized in general can be humbling. Similar to my answer to an earlier question, I think it is worth pausing to recognize that we are all continuously learning and to focus on using the feedback you receive to grow. Hopefully, this feedback has been offered with the intention of helping you, not harming you. However, depending upon how the other person has chosen to deliver their feedback, your first inclination may be to be embarrassed or to become defensive. Both are common reactions, but neither are particularly productive. If you can push past these negative emotions, a more constructive response would be to acknowledge your mistake, apologize for the mistake, and commit to doing better in the future. For instance, “I made a mistake and I’m sorry; thank you for sharing this feedback with me so I can do better in the future.” But

most importantly—you need to follow that up with doing better!

Q: What if someone argues with me or dismisses me when I try to correct them?

A: First and foremost, it is important to remember that you cannot control how someone responds to your feedback, you can only control how you provide feedback and react to their response. It is also important to consider that a person may become argumentative or dismissive because they feel embarrassed. In some cases, revisiting the topic later, privately and after the person has had time to reflect on your initial feedback or after you have had time to reframe your approach—may have positive results. In other cases, the person may be uninterested or unwilling to accept your feedback; and, in such cases, it is up to you to choose if and how you want to continue to engage with the person.

Q: What do I do if someone continues to use offensive language after I have expressed my concerns or explained how it has impacted me or others?

A: As I mentioned in the previous question, you can only control yourself. If you have shared your concerns about how particular language has impacted you or explained how it is disrespectful, and the other person refuses to accept that their language is problematic, it is up to you to decide if and how you want to continue to engage with the person. And in making this decision, remember that you have the right to protect your mental health and well-being. In some cases, you may decide that you no longer wish to engage with the person—this may mean simply unfollowing them on social or not participating in activities or conversations with that person. In other cases, you may not have the option to completely disassociate with the person, whether the person is family member you see at holiday gatherings or a coworker you see at the office or in virtual meetings. Establishing rituals and routines to manage your expectations and emotions may be useful in these cases; an example of such a ritual may be building in time following scheduled interactions to feel your feelings privately, to discuss your feelings with a trusted confidant, or to do something that brings you joy and helps you move forward in a better emotional space. In select cases, where the per-

son is violating established rules of conduct, for instance, those outlined in employee manuals or school handbooks, you may wish to report the incidences through appropriate channels.

Q: My organization recently announced that staff may use “preferred” names and pronouns on our platforms but did not provide any further support. How can I respectfully but earnestly request formal training and support from leadership?

A: It is great that your organization has taken a step toward inclusivity with this announcement; however, it is understandable that you, and perhaps your colleagues, want or need additional information. Depending on your organizational structure there may be a couple of options for initiating this request: you might approach the individual who communicated the announcement, or you might begin a conversation with your direct supervisor. In either case, you could start the conversation by expressing gratitude for the change but noting that additional guidance would be useful for staff. For instance, you might explain that you and your colleagues could benefit from more information about the importance of allowing staff to self-identify and of protecting staff from any repercussions—including being misgendered or deadnamed. You could also suggest that having this information documented and institutionalized would be helpful, but having a sensitization session where people can ask questions and learn more would also be beneficial. You may also note that while the intention is laudable, it may be better to remove the term “preferred” from the guidance, to reflect respect of individuals’ identities. Remember, as language evolves, we must all learn together—your leadership may not be experts in this area and they may not know what staff need or want without your input.

Q: How can I help to normalize the use of respectful language in my workplace, where language about identities is not always respectful?

A: Identifying the underlying reason that respectful language is not the norm can help determine how best to address the situation. Is there a systemic issue, for instance, is leadership contributing to this problem—perhaps unintentionally? Is the issue

primarily associated with a select few colleagues? Depending on the extent of the situation and your organizational structure, you could broach subject with human resources or with your supervisor—explaining your concerns and exploring options for improving awareness and advancing inclusive language. Or, more informally, you could practice modeling inclusive and respectful language so that through repetition it becomes the norm, and you could consider approaching coworkers who you think may be receptive to learning more and helping promote respectful language. For instance, sharing your name and pronouns when you introduce yourself or including your pronouns in your signature can help others feel comfortable doing likewise—and can also create curiosity and inspire colleagues to learn more.

Q: How do you deal with an employer who discourages the use of inclusive language—including discouraging people from using preferred pronouns?

A: This is a difficult and deeply personal question that affects individuals differently. While allowing or encouraging the disclosure and use of gender pronouns can help foster an inclusive working environment, particularly for gender minorities, this is not always a priority for employers. Further, employment laws vary by location (state and country), in some cases even forbidding workers from discussing pronouns and related topics. In contrast to situations in which the absence of workplace policies or guidelines may allow opportunities for advancing inclusive language, exercising caution with an employer that has actively discouraged inclusive language may be necessary. Individuals finding themselves in this situation therefore must determine whether they can afford to continue to their employment—this includes considering the potential costs to your mental health and well-being as well as considering the economic costs to your livelihood.

Q: How do I deal with a family that does not agree with or understand the importance of inclusive language and is not interested in learning?

A: This is another challenging question without a simple solution. First and foremost, how you chose to deal with your family is your decision. You are

the expert when it comes to your personal needs and capacities, and you know your family best. In some cases, family members who say they are not interested in learning may not be ready to learn—and revisiting the conversation at another time may be worthwhile. Remember that your family member's (or members') attitudes have been shaped by their own identities and experiences and reshaping those attitudes is unlikely to occur effortlessly or instantaneously. If you are willing and able to make the effort, you might reframe the conversation using rhetorical appeals that respond specifically to your unique audience. For instance, if you know your mother makes decisions based on data, consider presenting research and statistics; but, if your brother is more likely to think with his heart, sharing stories and personal feelings may be a better approach for evoking empathy and compassion. Framing the issue in a way that builds upon their existing values can help personalize the issue. Another option might be deciding it is better to agree to disagree, to avoid controversial topics as best you can in order to preserve your relationships with your family (and your sanity). However, in some situations, you may need to consider limiting your interactions with a family member or even severing the relationship to preserve your mental health and well-being—this is especially important if engaging with them creates trauma for you. Remember, you cannot control how your family speaks to or with you—you can only control if and how you engage with them.

Q: What do I do if others are deliberately using abusive or offensive language (like misgendering) toward me? What do I do if I cannot stop others from bullying me and am having trouble managing the situation?

A: What you are describing is a form of verbal harassment. Harassment is a serious issue that can have short- and long-term physical and psychological effects. In cases of harassment, directly engaging the abuser is often unadvisable, as a confrontation may escalate the situation. A better approach is to remain calm, document the harassment, and discuss the situation with a trusted professional. Addressing emotional trauma from the abuse is crucial. Even if you think you can manage your feelings alone, speaking to a mental health professional can help you unpack your emotions and develop strategies for dealing with the situa-

tion in the future. For students, a school counselor may be able to help and for those in the workforce, many employers offer employee assistance programs where you can connect with a professional therapist. Crisis hotlines are also available in many places and can offer instantaneous support, especially if you feel you may be in immediate danger of harming yourself (or others). Please do not be afraid to ask for help—you are not alone, even if you may feel that way at this moment. Additionally, many schools and workplaces have established codes of conduct that explain different forms of harassment and provide guidance for reporting behavior that does not align with these codes as part of student handbooks or employee manuals. If you are experiencing harassment in these settings, you may wish to report the behavior through available channels—and having documentation can help.

Q: How do I learn more about or become better with this stuff?

A: There are many ways to continue to learn and each person should think about what will work best for themselves. If you love a good style guide—read one of our language guides or research style guides produced by organizations with expertise in the subject area or areas in which you are interested. If you're a bibliophile, whether you like fiction or nonfiction, reading is a great way to enhance empathy, so find authors from different communities and explore the worlds they create in their stories or share in their works. Similarly, if you're a music-lover, listen to songs by artists from different cultures or if you're a film-buff, watch some movies written and produced by and featuring groups you're eager to learn more about. If you know of others interested in learning more, find opportunities to learn together and share your learnings. You can also practice using inclusive language by yourself by writing terms in a journal or by repeating them aloud. For instance, to become more comfortable with the singular they/them pronoun, try writing "Jamie likes to bake; I should ask them if they have a good cupcake recipe" or saying "I should invite Ali to the meeting, I think they would be interested in the topic." Find ways to make the learning enjoyable for you—and remember, practice makes progress!

Learn More

To learn more about inclusive respectful language and to access EngenderHealth's current suite of language guides, please visit <https://www.engenderhealth.org/technical-publications-resources/language-guides>.

Author Notes and Acknowledgments

Amy Agarwal brings more than 20 years of professional experience conceptualizing, researching, writing, and editing an array of communications and development materials—from blogs and press releases to conference abstracts and event collateral to curricula and toolkits to policy and research publications. With expertise in gender equity and social inclusion, she has also led gender integration strategies, facilitated gender and development trainings, and authored equity and inclusivity resources for a variety of global health and international development organizations.

Amy has been a core member of EngenderHealth's communications department since 2019 and currently serves as the organization's Principal Writer, Editor, and Designer. In this position, she leads EngenderHealth's language refresh initiative, which aims to ensure the language we use is accurate, nonjudgmental, destigmatizing, and inclusive of the diversity of our partners and impact populations. Through this initiative, she has coauthored language guides focusing on an array of priority topics for EngenderHealth, including abortion; adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health; gender-based violence; gender, sex, and sexuality; maternal and obstetric care; people with disabilities; and philanthropic communications. Additionally, Amy has designed and facilitated sensitization sessions focusing on inclusive and respectful language for colleagues and college students. This publication draws from questions posed in these sessions and during ad hoc conversations about inclusive language.

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