IT@UofT Inclusive Language Guide

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The IT@UofT Inclusive Language Guide is a living document, and contributions are always welcome. Your comments on this resource as well as other suggestions or questions you may have for the ITS Inclusivity Working Group can be submitted at any time using our community feedback and input form.

IT@UofT Working Group on Inclusive Language
Information Technology Services / University of Toronto

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Introduction: Inclusive language in Information Technology (IT)

The University of Toronto (U of T) is committed to making the institution an inclusive, diverse and equitable environment for everyone. The Division of People Strategy, Equity and Culture (PSEC) states:

Diversity, inclusion, respect, and civility are among our fundamental values. Outstanding scholarship, teaching and learning can thrive only in an environment that embraces the broadest range of people and encourages the free expression of their diverse perspectives. We recognize that a diverse campus and a culture of inclusive excellence is an essential part of the foundation of our institution.

Inclusive language can help everyone feel welcome and included in our organization: it puts people and humanity first and uses words and phrases that are neutral and welcoming of all people regardless of their race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. U of T has a long tradition of upholding these values and continues to renew our commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and the IT@UofT community seeks to reflect these values. Equity offices working under the umbrella of PSEC push for "inclusive excellence" by providing consultation and resolution of concerns as well as resources and training.

In the past, and in some cases currently, workplaces across Canada, including those in technology, haven't always been welcoming to equity-deserving and historically marginalized groups. ITS leadership aims to support practices, including use of inclusive language, to ensure a supportive environment for all. A key principle of the IT@UofT Strategic Plan is that we must be deliberate in our recruitment, retention and growth of our people and increase the visibility, transparency and availability of IT talent and specialized skill sets. By working towards a more inclusive environment, we ensure a diversity of skills and experiences in our community.

As Information Technology Services (ITS) employees, the work we do is at the center of University life. Inclusive language has an important role to play in the client support we offer, the applications we develop, the services we provide and more. If we take the time to think about and be intentional with our words, we can help make everyone feel welcome working in ITS and at U of T.

U of T's PSEC office espouses our commitment to diversity and expression at U of T, striving for a "culture of belonging." That is a shared responsibility for IT@UofT and the community at large. In support of this commitment to inclusion, one can obtain fundamental resources and understandings of language and concepts in relation to identity and support of diversity from the Sexual & Gender Diversity Office (SGDO), which also provides workshops and training to our community at U of T. Additionally, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) office at U of T ensures that the University meets the AODA standard obligations as legislated by the Province of Ontario and makes the University accessible for all staff. The AODA office

delivers [online and in-person training](#) and provides outreach and resources among other support services.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

The IT@UofT Inclusive Language Guide was created as an opportunity for staff members within ITS to learn more about inclusive language and communication. This guide does not set out to be comprehensive or definitive, because language is constantly evolving. We ask that you approach this guide with empathy and an open mind. By taking these recommendations into consideration, you will contribute to making IT@UofT a more welcoming and inclusive space for everyone.

The Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC)

The OHRC states that everyone should be treated equally in the workplace with freedom from discrimination or harassment. It is designed to protect employees from discrimination based on:

- Age
- Disability
- Family and marital status
- Pardon and record of offences
- Race and places of origin
- Religion
- Sex, sexual orientation and gender

The following considerations outline many of these areas, along with background information and some key examples focusing on inclusivity within the workplace.

Guiding Principles

Diversity refers to awareness and acceptance of individual differences. *Equity* is the process of providing fair and respectful treatment for all people. *Inclusivity* involves welcoming differences, respecting diversity and creating community. *Intersectionality* is a framework for understanding how people with overlapping or intersecting social identities experience, or contribute to, various forms of discrimination and privilege.

Our aim is to have an inclusive environment by utilizing the following guiding principles:

Put people first
- This guide encourages the use of language that centers on people as individuals, not their disabilities or differences.

The words we choose make a difference
- The words we use can have a powerful impact on others. Words or expressions can carry meanings such as embedded stereotypes that exclude others, even unintentionally.

Use inclusive terms
- Strive to use language that includes as many people as possible. For example, when communicating with a group of people, use gender-inclusive language.

Avoid generalizations and stereotypes
- Generalizations and stereotypes are language choices that make assumptions about an aspect of someone's identity such as gender, culture, ancestry or age.

Approach language with empathy
- Everyone has a different identity, but everyday language has developed to reflect the values and norms of the most dominant culture. Keep an empathetic mindset when choosing language — others will be impacted by language choices in ways you are not.

Remember that language changes
- As our society evolves and develops new values, our language also needs to change to reflect those values. For example, a term that was commonly used ten years ago may need to be reconsidered.

Practice self-reflection
- Using inclusive language is a process, and no one is perfect — sometimes, language can be biased, even if we do not realize it. Bringing an element of mindful self-reflection to the language used in your speech and in writing can help you to understand the people you work with and how language might impact them.

Considerations for inclusive language in the workplace

AGE

"Ageism is a socially constructed way of thinking about persons based on negative stereotypes as well as a tendency to structure society as though everyone is the same age – all old or all young." - The Ontario Human Rights Commission

In the workplace, commonplace language can imply that a certain age group is more able than another. The language we use can reflect negative stereotypes about a person's age, and both younger and older people can experience age as a barrier in the workplace.

Sometimes, language that perpetuates stereotypes about age is overt, but it can be subtle. Examples of ageism in workplace language could include:
- Using "*young*" as a positive descriptor and "*old*" as a negative descriptor, or vice versa.
- Assuming or implying that a client has issues using an electronic device because of their age.
- Calling an inexperienced hire *"young"* or an experienced hire "*mature*" as a substitute for describing their qualifications.
- Describing one's work ethic or performance as a direct result of their generational traits, rather than their individual circumstances or other barriers.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Use language that does not draw on age-related stereotypes or privilege one age group over another.
- Use language that does not refer to a person's age or generation unless it makes sense within a specific context.
- Use language that refrains from using terms or phrases that have negative age or generational connotations.

DISABILITY

Many people live with disabilities, both visible and invisible. A disability could refer to any degree of physical, developmental, mental or learning disability. In the workplace, people with disabilities can experience barriers, and this is sometimes reflected in the language we use.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- A good practice when referring to people with disabilities is an approach that puts the focus on the individual rather than their disability. When you do refer to a person's disability, put their identity as a person first. In the Canadian context, instead of calling someone a "*disabled person*", refer to them as a "*person with a disability*". However, refrain from describing the person by their disability unless you have a specific reason to.
- It is important to be aware that some everyday language used to describe people with disabilities is rooted in harmful stereotypes. For example, words like "*crippled*" and "*dumb*" carry with them negative connotations and should not be used.
- Be mindful about portraying a person as "*courageous*" or "*special*" or having *"special needs"* just because they have a disability, as it implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to effectively contribute to the workplace.
- Different people have different preferences for how their disability is addressed in language. If someone has disclosed their disability in the workplace, you can discreetly ask them their language preference.

ECONOMIC STATUS

Economic discrimination is discrimination based on economic factors such as job availability, wages, the prices and/or availability of goods and services and the amount of funding available to specific communities.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Avoid language that blames individuals for their economic circumstances. Instead, focus on the systemic factors that contribute to economic inequality, such as unequitable access to resources and opportunities (e.g., education). It's important to recognize that economic circumstances are not solely the result of personal choices or behaviours, but rather the result of larger, complex socio-economic structures.
- When writing about income, only include what is necessary and relevant and be as specific as possible (for example, classifications based on federal and provincial poverty guidelines).
- Avoid non-inclusive language regarding income such as "*poverty-stricken*" and "*the poor*". Instead, try "*people whose income is below the poverty threshold*" and "*people with low income*".

FAMILY AND MARITAL STATUS

"As a first step to preventing discrimination, employers, service providers, landlords and the public need to recognize human rights issues based on family status. If their needs are not recognized or supported, family caregivers often face barriers in accessing housing, jobs and services.

Family caregivers are also protected from discrimination and harassment related to other Code grounds, including disability, marital status, sex (pregnancy, breastfeeding, gender identity), sexual orientation, race, colour, ancestry, religion, age and receipt of social assistance (housing). This protection applies even if the caregiver is only associated with a person identified by one of these grounds." - The Ontario Human Rights Commission

There are many types of families in our society, and "*family*" has evolved from how it was traditionally defined. It is essential to be aware of the diverse types of partnerships that exist, including parent-type relationships and living arrangements in order to avoid assumptions and to respect diverse familial relationships.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Avoid assuming one's marital status such as "*husband/wife*" and use more inclusive terms like "*partner/significant other*", if applicable.
- Avoid assuming one's familial structure such as "*mom/dad*", "*brother/sister*" and "*son/daughter*" and use more inclusive terms like "*parent/guardian/caregiver*", "*sibling*" and "*kids/children*".

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Canada's relationship to Indigenous Peoples has been shaped by colonialism and imperialism. Through a campaign of cultural genocide, Indigenous Peoples were banned from speaking their languages and practicing their customs. Workplaces and the tech industry have both appropriated several culturally specific terms from Indigenous cultures. This appropriation disrespects and erases Indigenous traditions.

Note that "Indigenous Peoples" is a collective name for the original Peoples of North America and their descendants. Often, "Aboriginal Peoples" is also used. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Indigenous Peoples: First Nations (status and non-status), Inuit and Métis. These are three distinct Peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

As a starting point, here are some good practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Refrain from using terminology that perpetuates stereotypes**.** Phrases like "*Indian princess*", "*low man on the totem pole*", "*sitting Indian style*", etc. imply a monolithic culture. Using terms like "*Indian"* and *"Eskimo"* when describing Indigenous Peoples are historical misnomers with negative connotations for many and should not be used by non-Indigenous people. If you are unsure about a phrase, do some research into its origins and think about its meaning and implications.
- Use present tense and contemporary examples. Only using the past tense when referring to Indigenous Peoples reinforces the myth of the "*vanishing Indian*" and negates the experiences and dynamic cultures of Indigenous Peoples today.
- It is important to maintain the plurality of the word "*Peoples*" to uphold the inclusivity of the term and recognize the individual and diverse identities of the various groups that they encompass. Generalizations negate the diversity of Indigenous Peoples and create an inaccurate understanding. Whenever possible, learn about specific individuals from their community.

RACE AND PLACES OF ORIGIN

"Every person has the right to be free from racial discrimination and harassment. You should not be treated differently because of your race or other related grounds, such as your ancestry, colour, place of origin, ethnic origin, citizenship or creed." - The Ontario Human Rights Commission

U of T is comprised of a global community, and we value diversity of thought, education, lived experience and participation. As a workplace, we deem it critical that all our communication and activity be inclusive, and we continue to learn from and share in that diversity.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Be mindful about referring to a person's race, ethnic identity or country of origin unless it is relevant to the communication. For example, instead of saying "*Liam is an Australian employee*," it may be more appropriate to say, "*Liam is an employee*". Remember that a person's physical appearance does not define their racial or ethnic identity, nationality or cultural background.
- Avoid generalizing — even with positive or neutral tones — about people, regions or cultures and making associations between someone's background (or the background of an entire group) and cultural stereotypes. For example, "*All Canadians are polite*". Instead, approach each person as an individual and focus on the unique qualities they bring to the workplace.
- Embrace linguistic diversity and recognize that language belongs to everyone. Linguistic microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination that can be expressed in comments such as, "*I don't understand your thick accent*," or by interrupting someone mid-conversation to correct their pronunciation or use of grammar. These seemingly innocuous comments can have a profound impact on individuals and contribute to a culture of exclusion.
- Be aware of your language use and actively work towards creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment. For example, instead of assuming how someone's name is pronounced, ask them how they pronounce their name.

RELIGION

"The OHRC protects personal religious beliefs, practices or observances, even if they are not considered by others, even by a majority of people of the same religion, to be essential elements of the creed." - The Ontario Human Rights Commission

Religion is the belief in a higher power/powers and associated traditions. There are several major religions that are well-known around the world, including: the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism. This list is not exhaustive, as there are many diverse belief systems practiced around the world. It is essential to respect other people's belief systems and avoid assumptions based on the dominant religion or your own beliefs.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Inclusive language should be free of any reference to one's religious practice or belief unless relevant to the context. For example, making modifications to a work plan to accommodate religious beliefs and/or practices would be a context when religion is relevant.
- Broad statements about a particular religion should be avoided as they generalize all groups and do not recognize unique practices or beliefs.
- Remember that religion is a personal issue. An individual may have little or no religious affiliation and/or may not wish to be part of certain religious celebrations or practices. It is inappropriate for a person to use language that tries to persuade another to comply with a particular religious belief or practice in the workplace.

SEX, SEXUAL ORIENTATION/SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY

The OHRC promotes the equality of people of all sexes, sexual orientations/sexualities and gender identities. The language we use at work should both reflect and respect the sexual and gender diversity of the University. "*Sex*", "*gender identity*" and "*sexual orientation/sexuality*" are terms that are often grouped together, but they have three different meanings:

Sex
Sex is usually assigned to a person at birth. It classifies a person as male, female or intersex based on physical characteristics, such as reproductive systems and hormones.

Gender identity
Gender identity is separate from sex and is not based on biological attributes. It refers to the individual and/or social experience of being a man, woman, neither or anywhere along the gender spectrum. Gender identity is a person's innate, deeply felt psychological identification as a man, woman, both, neither or another gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth.

In the context of gender, it is also important to differentiate gender identity from **gender expression**, which is a term used to describe the way someone presents their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language and voice. A person's chosen name and pronoun can also be a way of expressing gender.

It is important to remember that we should never assume someone's gender identity based on their gender expression.

Sexual orientation/sexuality
Sexual orientation/sexuality is a term that describes an individual's experience of attraction, whether it be their desire, romantic or sexual attractions. LGBTQ2S+ is a term used to describe non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender persons.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Be mindful of using unnecessarily gendered terms and phrases. For example, when we use terms like "*manpower"*, we are erasing women from the work that is being done. Additionally, referring to a group of woman-identifying colleagues as "*girls*" is infantilizing and unnecessary singles out their gender. Alternatively, you could use "*personnel"*.
- Be pronoun aware. Pronouns are words people use to refer to one another. They are highly personal and usually reflect someone's gender identity. In English, we most commonly see the pronouns *"she/her/hers", "he/him/his"* and *"they/them/theirs".* However, some people might go by any combination. It is important to remember that gender identity is complex: a person's expression of their gender does not always align with the pronouns they use.
- In our IT@UofT workplace, we should never make assumptions about a colleague or client's pronouns. If someone has their pronouns displayed in their email signature or introduces themself as using certain pronouns, use those pronouns. If you are unsure of the pronouns someone uses, you can:
  - Refer to the person by their name until you establish their pronouns.
  - Politely ask the person which pronouns they use.
- When referring to groups of people, we have an opportunity to promote inclusion by steering away from gendered pronouns. For example, "*hey you guys*" can be rephrased to "*hi, folks*". This small change can make a big difference in promoting a workplace culture that is respectful and inclusive of all identities.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Using plain language in communication materials ensures that critical information is readable and understandable for everyone, regardless of their background or language proficiency. This promotes equity and access to information, making it easier for individuals to find, read and understand content. Additionally, employing plain language practices saves resources and time when translating text. Writing in plain language doesn't mean oversimplifying or removing critical information, rather, it presents information clearly and concisely.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Present information in a logical order and list the important details first. Using a consistent approach to identify information with headings, subheadings and other formatting techniques can make content more accessible and easily scannable for all readers.
- Use language that is familiar to your audience and provide definitions for unusual words and abbreviations. Avoid jargon, idioms and expressions that could potentially exclude or confuse readers.

VIOLENT LANGUAGE

Language that uses violent or aggressive connotations, even if meant metaphorically, can negatively impact workplace culture. Many of these phrases are commonly embedded in everyday speech and ultimately block our ability to focus on our core humanity. Violent language can also create a sense of fear and discomfort in individuals who may have experienced violence or trauma.

As a starting point, here are some suggested practices to employ to promote inclusive language in the workplace:

- Avoid using metaphors and expressions that condone violence. "*Killing two birds with one stone*" could be rephrased using plain language such as, "*achieve more than one goal simultaneously*" or "*work on these tasks in parallel*".
- Avoid violent language to describe mental health struggles and instead use descriptive and accurate language to express feelings and emotions. "*I'm going insane with all of this work; I could jump off a bridge!*" could be rephrased to, "*I am feeling overwhelmed with my workload right now*".
- Refrain from using language that blames an individual. "*They were asking for it*" could be rephrased to "*let's collectively learn from this situation*".
- Avoid military phrases that refer to guns, bullets and ammunition to describe office workplace tasks. "*I'm going to have to pull the trigger on this project*," could be rephrased to "*I'm going to move forward with this project*". Another example is "*divide and conquer*" whereas one can state, "*let's ensure this work is appropriately delegated*".

Conclusion

If we change the way we speak, we can move towards creating a welcoming and inclusive working environment. By reading this document, you are taking the first step towards changing our culture. We encourage you to apply these precepts to your workplace.

Remember: harm can occur despite our best efforts. If you make a mistake, apologize, listen, reflect and agree to move forward. We are all learning.

"*Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.*" - Verna Myers

Let's dance together!

Inclusivity resources at U of T

- [Accessibility – PSEC](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office | ARCDO](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Anti-Racism Strategic Tables – PSEC](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Family Care Office](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Institutional Equity Office](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Office of Indigenous Initiatives at U of T](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Policies and Guidelines – PSEC](#) (Tri-campus)
- [Positive Space at U of T](#) (Tri-campus)
- [SGDO](#) (Tri-campus)
- [UTSC Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Office](#)
- [UTM Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Office](#)

Appendix: Inclusive language within IT

Despite its increasing diversity, the IT field contains many non-inclusive terms and phrases. To encourage collaboration and active input within the ITS community, we have created a working document that outlines non-inclusive terms within the IT industry. Please feel free to contribute whatever terms and/or term alternatives you have encountered in your own life experiences. We welcome and look forward to receiving your input so that together, we can create a robust and inclusive glossary of IT terms.

Non-inclusive IT terminology	Inclusive alternative IT terminology
Black hat hacker / white hat hacker	Malicious hacker / ethical hacker
White box	Open box Glass box testing
Black box	Closed box Functional testing Acceptance testing
Blacklisted / whitelisted	Block list / safe list Allow list / deny list
Click	Select
Disable / enable use	Deactivate / activate
Dummy data Dummy value	Example data Simulated data Placeholder data
Equity-seeking	Equity-deserving
Grandfathered code	Legacy code

Housekeeping (as a job role)	Maintenance Upkeep Cleaning
Kill (a process)	Halt Stop
Kill the bug	Fix the issue
Male or female connectors and fasteners	Connector and receptacle Plug and socket Pin and receptacle
Man hours	Person / engineer hours Level of effort Resource hours
Man in the middle	Attacker Person in the middle
Master branch	Primary branch Main branch
Master copy	Primary copy; template
Master or parent system	Primary system Main system
Mature / young	Experienced / inexperienced
Mute	Silent
Native	Built-in
Penetration testing	Security assessment Vulnerability testing

Red team	Cyber Offence team
Repeat offender	History of violations Treat actor
Sanity check	Confidence check Verification
Scrum master	Scrum leader
Tech guru	Tech expert Tech specialist
Traffic Light Protocol (TLP) White	Freely distributable information Unrestricted Public release
War room	Situation room
Webmaster	Website manager; web developer
White hat (hacker)	Ethical hacker Non-malicious hacker
White paper	Position paper Publication Report
White space	Empty space
White team	Cyber exercise cell