



Equality & Diversity in Language and Image

Guidance for authors and communicators



Accessible



Inclusive



Multicultural



Valuing



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This guidance was first published in 1993 under the title 'An Equal Opportunities Guide to Language and Image'. This version has been amended to reflect the current OU equality and diversity strategy and contemporary equality and diversity terminology. It is available in a printed format and to download from the staff intranet. Comments or suggestions for improving this guidance are welcomed and should be sent for the attention of the Senior Manager, Equality and Diversity.

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Introduction

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance provides suggestions for how to create accessible and inclusive communications. It will be useful for course authors in particular but is intended to be a guide for everyone producing written or audiovisual content. Much of what it says also applies to speech and everyday behaviour.

Our mission, our responsibilities

Our mission expresses our founding aspiration to provide opportunities to all. As such, equality and diversity have been part of the core values of the Open University since its inception. One of the ways in which the University can achieve its aim of being open to all is through increasing awareness of equality and diversity issues in the content and presentation of all its communications. Language reflects and enshrines the values and prejudices of the society in which it has evolved, and is a powerful means of perpetuating them. As communicators we have a responsibility both to give a true picture of society and to avoid discriminating against or excluding any sections of it.



Our equality and diversity strategy 'Making it Happen!' aims to create the conditions whereby people are treated on the basis of their merits and potential, regardless of age; disability; family circumstance; gender; political opinion; race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin; religion or belief; sexual orientation; socio-economic background, trade union membership or other distinctions. Many people experience disadvantage for more than one of these reasons, not a disadvantage inherent in any particular identity characteristic, but imposed by a society prejudiced against those who differ from the majority. Many people subjected to forms of discrimination can develop low self-

esteem. It is therefore important that Open University communications consciously counter these beliefs and demonstrates commitment to the rights and abilities of everyone.

Increase your awareness, take action

The first thing to bear in mind in any communication is who your audience could be: ensure that what you say involves the whole range of people possible.

- Be sensitive to the risk of offending, patronising or excluding, and don't take anything for granted.
- Try not to generalise unless you are sure it is valid. Without evidence to the contrary, it is easy to make subconscious assumptions about people (for instance that they are heterosexual, male, white).
- Take care to avoid stereotyping people on the basis of one characteristic and not seeing them as they really are.

Through your communications, you have an opportunity to challenge assumptions and stereotypes, to be inclusive, to value difference, to increase individuals' beliefs in their own worth and potential and to present the University as a culturally diverse, international institution.

Accessible writing style

Plain English makes information accessible to everyone, and it also avoids excluding people with little or no previous educational qualifications.

Jargon, long difficult sentences, archaic grammar and complicated structure can alienate people. Try to make your style as simple as possible, so that your meaning is as plain as possible. That way you will be less likely to discourage people, and they will be able to read faster, enjoy more, understand better and remember longer. The important thing is to keep your readers in mind and imagine you are talking to them. This will help you to write in a natural, friendly, conversational style.

Here are some ideas:

- Use 'I' or 'we' and address your reader as 'you', so long as this doesn't involve making false generalisations.
- Give examples from real life to illustrate your meaning (anything that's given a human touch is likely to be more interesting and easier to remember).
- Try to avoid a mismatch between the reader's ability and the writing. The level of difficulty of course material should be appropriate to the particular stage of the student's learning.

Plain readable English depends on well-structured sentences made up of familiar words. Your reader should be able to read them quickly, understand them clearly and think it worthwhile continuing. Here are some suggestions:

- Be precise and direct.
- Cut out surplus words (for example, use 'many' instead of 'a large number of'; 'now', not 'at this moment in time').
- Avoid rarely-used words when more common ones suit your purpose just as well.
- Avoid foreign words and phrases not in common use (for example, *ibid.*, *op. cit.*).
- Avoid jargon. When you need to use specialist vocabulary, introduce it carefully, and explain acronyms.
- Using the active rather than the passive form of a verb makes a sentence simpler and shorter (for example, 'we have decided to', not 'it has been decided that').
- Don't let your sentences and paragraphs get too long (aim for an average sentence length of 15-20 words). Vary sentence length to avoid a dull repetitive rhythm. An occasional very short sentence is useful for making an important point.
- Use only one main idea in a sentence.
- Simplify your structure. The more clearly your readers can see your structure, the more easily they will understand your message.
- Don't use continuous chunks of capital letters: they slow down the reader. The same goes for long passages of italic type.
- Use left justification so that text is evenly aligned at the left margin and spacing between words is always the same.
- Lines of type should not be too long or too short. If there are more than about 65 characters to a line, the reader's attention will start to wander.
- Avoid too many pages of solid print. Look for places where it would be appropriate to break them up with relevant illustrations and other devices, such as bullet points.

Age

Age is unlike other equality issues. We are all young at some time in our lives and we all expect to get old. Despite this, being old is still equated far too often with undesirable attributes, including dependency, rigidity of thought and the inability to learn new things. Factually, such views are incorrect. The vast majority of today's older people are active, fit and independent. The personality traits which are frequently used to describe them in disparaging terms are to be found in some people at all ages and stages of life. They have nothing to do with the process of ageing itself.

Language is a powerful method of structuring attitudes about old age. In this area our language is highly expressive and almost invariably derogatory, pitying or condescending. Words and phrases in common usage, such as 'mutton dressed as lamb', 'crinklies', 'dirty old man', 'old fogey', 'old codger', 'old dear' and 'old folk' all conjure up images which leave little doubt about attitudes to old age. Careful choice of language will help to shape the perspective presented. It is advisable to avoid the term 'the elderly' as this is now regarded by some as depersonalising and distancing and has connotations of dependency and frailty. Other terms, such as 'pensioners' and 'senior citizens', are accepted by some and rejected by others. 'Older people' is generally accepted by all.



Images should be avoided which portray older people as clumsy, frail, pathetic and needing to be helped, while younger members of the family are happily enjoying an exciting life. Similarly, the link that is assumed between beauty and youth implies a link between old age and ugliness, and is detrimental to older people. The best images portray older people as rounded individuals, participating in society.

For younger people, language and image can easily reinforce stereotypes. The image of young people as carefree, without any pressures or worries or without adequate life experience to make informed decisions can be entirely misleading. Some young people are carers, have worked from an early age, have suffered hardship and have had major successes in their lives. Expectations of younger people can also be based on stereotypes – for example, not all younger people are computer experts or intuitive to the latest technologies.

Disability

The Disability Rights Commission estimates that around 10 million people in the UK are included in the definition of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act. Because of their 'invisibility' it is easy to forget that, for example, that not everyone:

- can leave their home at will
- has good eye sight and hearing
- is able to drive

This can lead to statements like; 'next time you walk into a shop' or 'when you are driving your car'. When talking about disabled people, it is easy to fall into traps arising from the view point of a person without disabilities, which may exclude or offend members of your audience.



Marginalising

You will marginalise people who share a particular physical disability or have an identifiably different lifestyle by placing them in artificially homogeneous categories based on this one characteristic. Disabled people are especially vulnerable to this. For instance, it is still relatively common practice to define people by their disability, using terminology such as 'epileptics'. To talk instead of 'people with epilepsy' puts this characteristic into the perspective of a much wider life experience. 'People with disabilities' is a term which is commonly used but saying 'disabled people' is also acceptable as it emphasises that people are disabled by a society that doesn't accommodate them, rather than by their condition.

Patronising

All groups perceived as falling short of socially prescribed norms are likely to be seen as inferior in some way. In our University environment this might not be overt, but it's not always easy to avoid being patronising. Disabled people are especially vulnerable because the media and some charitable organisations reinforce an image of disabled people as 'unfortunate' and even 'pathetic' objects of patronage rather than as people with legitimate expectations and rights – to accessible public facilities, to employment, to a decent standard of living, for instance.

Condescending language such as 'Joe Bloggs is a polio victim' or 'confined to a wheelchair' should obviously be avoided. Equally undesirable is the portrayal of disabled people as courageous heroes, succeeding in some field despite their disability rather than because of their ability.

Blind people use terms like 'See you later', and can be irritated by well meaning but clumsy attempts to avoid using 'see'. However, try not to use phrases that equate a physical condition with a shortcoming, like 'blind spot' or 'deaf to appeals'.

Use positive images of disabled people to illustrate your text, i.e. not as examples of disability but where the disability is incidental to the activity the person is doing. Try to avoid false or negative stereotypes: try to present an accurate representation of the variety of disabled people. For example, don't confine images to those of wheelchair users, who make up a very small percentage of people with disabilities.

Format of materials

Bear in mind the needs of disabled people in the physical design of your text as well. You could consider making it available in Braille or large print, or as an audio-tape; and you could add subtitles to your video. Glossy paper and coloured print on a coloured background make reading difficult for anyone. Think too about ease of handling: whether a heavy book could be split up, for instance, or whether a ring binder, which is easier to open, would be an appropriate format. Where course material is concerned, it is important to plan for these considerations early in the development stages, and to discuss the possibilities with LTS staff. Alternative media could be an integral part of your presentation, rather than an optional extra or afterthought. There is additional guidance on this topic – see the further resources section.

Checklist of terms

Groups representing disabled people have tried to establish a vocabulary for dealing with the problems of appropriate language. There is some disagreement, however, and the preferred use of language changes over time. Here are some suggestions:

Don't Say

Normal,
to describe non-disabled people

The disabled
not a homogeneous group, separate from the rest of society

Affliction, handicap

Spastics, epileptics
a medically imposed label is a stigma and serves to undermine people's rights

Mental handicap, mental age of

Victim of, crippled by, suffering from, afflicted by

Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair

Deaf
as a blanket term

The blind, visually challenged

Do Say

Disabled people
which emphasises that they are disabled by the environment

Impairment, condition, disorder, difficulty

People with cerebral palsy, people with epilepsy

Learning difficulties, learning disabilities, learning-disabled, severe or profound learning difficulties

Person who has, person with

Wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair, has impaired mobility

Partially deaf, profoundly deaf.
Some people in the deaf community prefer to use 'the Deaf' as a political term, emphasising that they are a linguistic minority, not a disabled group

Blind or partially sighted person, person with little or no sight, visual impairment

Ethnicity, cultural and religious diversity

We live in a multicultural society, with a rich variety of traditions, cultures and values. However, we are all aware of racism: those beliefs and attitudes expressed in forms of behaviour and institutionalised practices, which serve to discriminate against or to marginalise people judged to be of another 'race'. We are concerned here with unintentional racism, whereby the views, values and attitudes of the dominant (in the UK, white) group are exclusively presented. It can be hard for people to realise that this is in fact what is happening as it is often implicit rather than overt.

Teaching materials alone cannot redress inequalities in society but they should not reinforce and perpetuate untrue assumptions and beliefs. The process of education should challenge such prejudices and ignorance. It can go further than that: it can become a means of increasing understanding, particularly the majority culture's knowledge of minority ethnic groups; and it can help to promote equality in society by providing positive images and role-models, encouraging individuals to realise their potential.



Forms of bias

People come into contact with our University with very varied experiences and backgrounds. Some students may well be able to evaluate the materials presented to them; others may believe in 'the authority of the printed word'. There is always a danger of presenting material as pure, objective 'facts'; particularly in the Sciences where the assumption is that it is value-free. In fact, white culture and values are often presented as the norm, superior to all others; knowledge selected from a Eurocentric viewpoint is presented as all that is worth knowing and necessarily 'correct'. There can also be a danger of being 'Anglo centric', ignoring Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; or of using 'American' when really referring to the United States. This inherent bias of the text should be made explicit and as far as possible countered.

The two most common forms of bias are omission and stereotyping.

Omission

All authors limit their discussion and exclude certain material. By including certain material the author defines what is important. By excluding other points of view or experience, the author defines these as not important or valued. This can have tremendous influence on the reader's view of the subject. Only certain aspects of the world's art, music and beliefs are endorsed as being worthy of study; others are set against them as being less refined and certainly of less significance. Different forms of social organisation, economic development or scientific approach may similarly be disregarded or patronised as less significant than those in the so-called developed world.

A broader approach can thus improve the material for all readers but is particularly useful in making it relevant for minority ethnic readers. They are then able to identify with it, and to see their own heritage and culture being valued. A reader who cannot relate to the material, or who knows that it is at best partial or at worst misleading or incorrect, is unlikely to continue to engage with it.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is the attribution of particular characteristics – appearance, temperament, potential etc.– to all members of an assumed group or 'race'. 'Race' is in fact a social and political construct rather than a biological one. Members of minority groups can sometimes be seen as deviant or threatening and subsequently stereotyped with negative characteristics – laziness or criminality for example. Even 'benign' stereotyping – as in the notions that all Asians are ambitious or that Muslim girls are passive – can be misleading and damaging.

Roles – social and occupational – are also often stereotyped and can become confounded with racist stereotypes. Black people, for example, are often portrayed in particular occupations, such as hospital cleaners and factory workers, which convey and confirm a status and position assigned to them by the majority culture. The choices made by many minority ethnic people to pursue higher status careers in law, medicine, and dentistry for example may also reinforce the viewpoint that different groups in society study different subjects. The reality is a far more complex picture and it is important to reflect this actual diversity and challenge the stereotype.

Checklist for multicultural material

- Avoid white supremacy thinking, for instance equating white with civilised or best, black with backward or of less worth.
- The diversity of contemporary British (or any other) society should be reflected: people of different ethnic groups and cultures should be portrayed, especially in case studies and illustrations. Ask yourself, is this the whole picture?
- Use examples which show people with a variety of attributes, whether of personal characteristics, lifestyles or occupational statuses.
- Don't make assumptions about people's national origin or religious or linguistic background.
- Make sure that cultures and societies are represented accurately, not from the point of view of the authors' ethnicity.
- Each culture has its own values and it is also by these that it should be evaluated; similarly the diverse moral frameworks provided by different religions should be acknowledged where appropriate.
- Ask whether your text can be used by **all** students from a range of minority ethnic and religious backgrounds, in the UK and internationally, particularly in the case studies and examples you have chosen.

Terminology

Ethnicity

This is used to refer to the sense of identity which derives from membership of a group linked by different combinations of shared cultural characteristics, such as religion, language, history or geographical location. By this definition everyone belongs to an ethnic group, whether they are, in a given context, in the majority or in a minority. To stress this fact, when referring to a particular grouping of people, the phrase 'minority ethnic group' is recommended.

Black and Minority Ethnic

In the UK, 'Black people' generally refers either to people of African or Afro-Caribbean origin, including African-American or people born elsewhere with African or Afro-Caribbean heritage. Opinion is divided among British Asians on whether they consider themselves as black. However, this term probably does not cover adequately other groups such as those of Middle Eastern, North African or East Asian origin, or people of mixed origins. When a wider definition is needed, the term Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) is widely used and accepted in the UK but may not mean much in other contexts. Therefore it is best to avoid generalisations of experience: it is better to state what groups are being discussed in a particular context.

'Black' with a capital 'B' is also used by some black people as a political term.

Be sensitive to the use of phrases like 'blacken someone's character' which equate black with bad.

Other terms

Avoid the terms 'non-white' and 'coloured' as these display white ethnocentrism – deviation from the supposed norm – which can obviously be offensive to black and minority ethnic people.

Use the term 'immigrant' appropriately: in the UK, it is often used incorrectly of people who are actually British nationals and have been born in the United Kingdom, or (again incorrectly) as a term which distinguishes black from white people. Many immigrants are white.

Use the term which different groups use about themselves: Inuit rather than Eskimo, Native American rather than Red Indian, or particular tribal names.

Ask for someone's first name or given name rather than their Christian name. Take the trouble to spell and pronounce people's names correctly.

Gender

The English language still tends to assume the world to be male unless proved otherwise: male is the standard, female a deviation from the norm. This tendency to exclude half of society is increasingly being challenged, and being sensitive to the ways in which we use gender-specific words can promote more positive attitudes to equality. Confronting sexism means not just avoiding discriminatory expressions, but thinking about positive ways to include women and men on equal terms.



Gender roles

A minority of households take the form of the idealized nuclear family. Reflect this reality in illustrations as well as what you write. Show women in jobs, hobbies, roles and situations traditionally ascribed to men and vice versa. Show alternatives to marriage and the nuclear family. Show people of varying physical appearance, not just 'ideal' types.

Terminology

The words we use can reflect the different standards applied to women and men. Avoid irrelevant modifiers like 'woman doctor' or 'male nurse'; the stereotypes implied by terms such as 'working mother' or 'housewife'; and the feminine (i.e. non-standard and often belittling) forms of nouns: actress, comedienne, usherette, hostess, poetess, manageress, and heroine.

The same words may have different connotations when used of women and men: 'ambitious', for instance, could denote approval of a man, but is often disparaging when said of a woman. Conversely, 'manly' qualities are often complimentary when ascribed to a woman, whereas 'feminine' qualities are usually meant to be derogatory if applied to men. Women are trivialised by the use of different words to describe their actions: men talk but women gossip. The test is always: would what I have said about this person mean the same and sound right if I said it of someone of the other sex?

In the same way, it is still common for women to be unnecessarily referred to in terms of their appearance, their marital status, their role rather than their actions, and by their first name or social title. Again, always ask yourself whether you would describe or address a man in the same way. 'Girl' is patronising to an adult woman, and so often is 'lady': use them only where it would be appropriate to refer to males as 'boys' or 'gentlemen'.

'Man'

'Man' at one time meant only 'person' or 'human being'. Although it technically still has this generic meaning, 'adult male person' tends to be the image the word calls up. Using 'man' in the generic sense can make it easy to slip from generalisations about people into generalisations about men only. This can be misleading or confusing in educational texts. Don't, however, fall into the trap of using a generic gender-neutral term but then subconsciously assigning male gender to it, for example; 'We shared a table with two Americans and their wives'.

He or she?

An author using the term 'he' to refer to any unspecified person may attempt to justify this either on the grounds that anything else is grammatically incorrect or on the grounds that that 'everyone knows' that 'he' includes 'she'. Neither can be defended.

The blanket use of 'he' makes it unclear just who is being included. 'He or she' (and there's no reason for the 'he' to come first) is clumsy if it has to be repeated often, but 's/he', 'you' and 'one' are available. So is 'they'; it is accepted by the Oxford English Dictionary as applicable to the singular [as in 'It's enough to drive anyone out of their senses' (George Bernard Shaw)]. Or the subject could be made plural, or your sentence could be written so as to avoid the need for a pronoun. A disclaimer that 'he' should be taken to include 'she' looks like the token gesture it is.

Checklist of terms

There are circumstances when gender-specific terms accurately reflect reality, for example in historical texts. But in most cases it is preferable to use gender-neutral terms. Think about what you actually mean, and who you are really referring to. It may be better to recast your sentence rather than to substitute one word for another. Here are a few alternatives to gender-specific words:

Don't say

Do say

Best man for the job	Best person for the job
Businessman/woman	Business person, manager, executive
Chairman/woman	Chair, chairperson, convenor, head, presiding over
Charwoman, cleaning lady	Cleaner
Craftsman/woman	Craftsperson, craft worker
Delivery man	Delivery clerk, courier
Dear Sir	Dear Sir/Madam (or Madam/Sir), Colleague, Student etc.
Fireman	Fire-fighter
Forefathers	Ancestors, forebears
Foreman/woman	Supervisor, head juror
Gentleman's agreement	Unwritten agreement, agreement based on trust
Headmaster/mistress	Head teacher

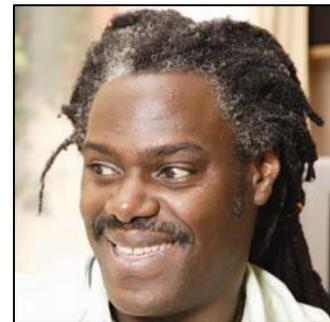
Don't say**Do say**

Housewife	Shopper, consumer, homemaker or whatever is meant in the context
Layman	Lay person
Man or mankind	Humanity, humankind, human species, human race
Man (verb)	Operate, staff, work at
Man in the street, common man	Average/ordinary/typical citizen/person (but is there such a person?)
Manhood	Adulthood
Man-hour	Hour, work-hour, labour time
Man-made	Artificial, manufactured, synthetic
Manning, manpower	Jobs, staffing, human resources, labour force, personnel, workers, workforce
Miss, Mrs	<i>Ms, unless a specific preference has been stated – but do you really need to use a title at all?</i>
Policeman/woman	Police officer
Right-hand man	Chief assistant, lieutenant
Salesman/girl/woman	Sales assistant/agent/clerk/representative/staff/worker
Spokesman/woman	Spokesperson, representative
Sportsmanship	Fairness, good humour, sense of fair play
Statesman/woman	Leader, politician
Steward/ess	Airline staff, flight attendant
Tax man	Tax collector/inspector, tax office
Waitress	Waiter, server
Working man, working mother/wife	Wage-earner, taxpayer, worker
Workman	Worker, operative, trades person
Workmanlike	Efficient, proficient, skilful, thorough

Sexual orientation

There is generally much more awareness about the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual people than there was twenty years ago. This is the result of new civil and legal protections and arising from this an increased openness by gay, lesbian and bisexual people. In the past, imagery of gay and lesbian people was generally confined to narrow stereotypes; the effeminate entertainer, the male hairdresser and the 'butch' lesbian spring to mind. Today, gay people can be open about their sexuality while serving in the armed forces, have an equal age of consent to sexual activity, the right to adopt and foster children and the right to form a civil partnership giving the same rights and responsibilities as heterosexual married couples. There is a greater recognition that gay people are immersed in all aspects of society, all kinds of occupations and are part of families and local communities.

Despite these changes, there are still many people who don't accept lesbian and gay sexuality. There is still much ignorance, prejudice and fear in some people's attitudes to lesbians and gay men. Sometimes the press is responsible for helping to sustain this intolerance, forming and reinforcing attitudes that provoke harassment, discrimination and hostility. Homophobic bullying in schools is still considered by gay and lesbian organisations to be a widespread problem.



Accurate and informed images of gay people should be presented in our University material. As equal members of society, lesbian, gay and bisexual men and women should be described in terms that do not trivialise or demean them, do not encourage discrimination or distorted images of their lives, do not sensationalise their activities, or imply illegality. Where the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people are different, then inclusion of particular experience in course and other materials, highlights our understanding and acceptance of the worth and value of different lives. Don't introduce issues of sexual orientation gratuitously, but where it is relevant, include it in a fair and objective way.

Guidelines

The term 'homosexual' is generally not used now, as it has medical origins and derogatory connotations, and is often taken to refer only to men.

Avoid 'heterosexism' (for example, phrases like 'the natural attraction between the sexes'). Don't suddenly switch from 'we' to 'they' in discussing issues around sexual orientation.

Avoid negative stereotyping of supposed characteristics of lesbians and gay men. Don't perpetuate myths such as that gay people are less suited to be parents, or are incapable of steady relationships, or are emotionally unstable.

Use 'partner' instead of 'spouse', and don't assume that everyone belongs to a traditional family. Avoid implying sympathy, that lesbians and gay men are less fortunate, or unhappy, or present a 'problem'.

Don't suggest that lesbian or gay sexual orientation is 'abnormal', 'perverted', 'immoral', or an illness.

Further resources

Disability etiquette

Author: S.C.I.P.S. - Strategies for creating inclusive programmes of study
<http://www.scips.worc.ac.uk/etiquette.html>

Diversity in the curriculum case studies

Author: OU Curriculum & Awards Office
<http://intranet.open.ac.uk/casestudies-diversity>

Editorial house style guidance

Author: OU Learning and Teaching Solutions
http://intranet.open.ac.uk/lts/production-process/documents/print/house_style.pdf

Editorial style and brand guide

Author: OU Marketing
<http://intranet.open.ac.uk/brand/p5.shtml>

Equality, diversity and accessibility in the curriculum guidance

Author: OU Equality and Diversity Office
<http://intranet.open.ac.uk/strategy-unit/offices/equality/keytools/facguidance.shtml>

Training

Diversity workshops

Author: OU Human Resources Development
Use the Learning Management System to search for 'diversity' and 'equality'
<http://intranet.open.ac.uk/via.asp?id=28388&url=http://staff-lms.open.ac.uk/staff-lms/>

OU online diversity training module

Author: OU Human Resources Development in collaboration with Marshall ACM
<http://www.open.ac.uk/diversity/>

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