BRILLIANT
INK

SAY THIS, NOT THAT: A DEI STYLE GUIDE

A BRILLIANT APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

HELLO!
WE'RE BRILLIANT INK.

Brilliant Ink is an internal communications agency that partners with organizations to build meaningful employee experiences.

Our work is dedicated to helping companies generate meaningful business results by communicating with employees in a way that inspires them to engage, connect, and take action. Of course, this requires careful consideration and a deep understanding of employee attitudes and overall mindsets.

In the world of employee engagement, there are few topics as critical and dynamic as the **language** we use to communicate inclusively with diverse employee groups.

Using inclusive language is a great way to show — not just tell — your organizational values. Employees from historically-excluded groups will notice and appreciate these small signposts of organizational culture. Read on to learn more about why inclusive communications matter — and what kinds of language you should (and shouldn't!) use in your employee communications.

We're so glad you're here!

- Farida Habeeb, Ph.D.
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WHY INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS MATTER

The business case for DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is astoundingly clear – especially as it relates to inclusion. According to Deloitte Insights, organizations with inclusive cultures are:
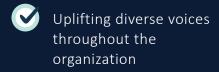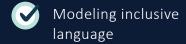
2x AS LIKELY TO MEET OR EXCEED FINANCIAL TARGETS

3x AS LIKELY TO BE HIGH-PERFORMING

6x MORE LIKELY TO BE INNOVATIVE AND AGILE

8x MORE LIKELY TO ACHIEVE BETTER BUSINESS OUTCOMES[1]

While creating an inclusive culture is complex, **Deloitte identifies *visible* communications as essential**. Communicators have the power to drive inclusive work environments by:

- ✓ Establishing two-way channels of communication
- ✓ Uplifting diverse voices throughout the organization
- ✓ Modeling inclusive language

[1] https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/deloitte-review/issue-22/diversity-and-inclusion-at-work-eight-powerful-truths.html

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

Words matter. Language is a fundamental part of our shared experience and essential to building bridges, changing minds, and shaping – and reflecting – reality. According to the Linguistic Society of America, inclusive language "acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities."[1]

How organizations use language can deeply impact how we view race, gender, and cultures. Even so-called "neutral" language can demonstrate bias toward dominant groups. **It takes conscious and continued effort to communicate in a way that is free of bias.**

HERE ARE THREE PRINCIPLES TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN CRAFTING INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS:

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

Person-first language aims to make the whole person – not their specific differences – the essential focus of our communication. Person-first language honors the individual for who they are, rather than reducing them to what they have (e.g., "person with schizophrenia," rather than "schizophrenic").

SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Inclusive communications strive to use words that reflect a person's choice in how they talk about themselves. While DEI style guides try to make commonly preferred terms clear, there's no way to know the personal preferences of every individual. Ask if you're unsure, and enable people to self-identify.

ACTIVE VOICE

Active voice puts the subject, or actor, of the sentence in the role of performing the action. Essential to conveying clarity and reducing bias toward systems of power, active voice directly names perpetrators of harm, rather than focusing on the object of the harm. Always name names!

[1] https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/guidelines-inclusive-language

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M BEING INCLUSIVE?

It's natural to feel some anxiety about writing inclusive employee communications. Am I doing this "right"? Are we being inclusive enough? What happens if we make a mistake?!

REMEMBER THAT:

LANGUAGE IS ALWAYS EVOLVING.

Because language is imprecise and our values shift over time, what's inclusive in 2021 may not be inclusive in 2051. This DEI style guide is meant to be a living document rather than the final word on inclusive communications.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IS HOTLY DEBATED.

With so many stakeholders involved in discussions on DEI, there's no definitive answer to what inclusive language is. Pay attention to context, ask questions, and use your best judgment.

IT'S OK TO MAKE MISTAKES.

There's no such thing as DEI without risk. As your organization makes decisions about language, it will make mistakes. Acknowledge these mistakes and embrace them as a learning opportunity!

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:
We encourage you to think of this as a reference point and thought starter. The sections we've outlined are just the tip of the iceberg, and we plan to build and expand this guide over time. Inclusion is a journey. Let's get started!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AGE

Recommendations: Ageism oppresses people of all ages – youth and adults. Stereotypes about youth as naïve or incapable, or older adults as cognitively or physically disabled, are culturally pervasive, and they must be challenged. There's usually no need to refer to someone's age, but when it's essential, list the specific age, rather than assigning an evaluative category. Don't use language that labels, patronizes, or sentimentalizes people based on their age. Ensure that people of all ages have a voice and full agency.

👍 SAY THIS

- young person
- youth
- **transitional age youth**
- adolescent
- preteen, teen, teenager
- student
- ageing
- older person, older adult
- people over...
- people under...
- people between the ages of...
- elder abuse

👎 NOT THAT

- childish
- immature
- juvenile
- troubled
- acting out
- going through a phase
- **underage women**
- middle-aged
- senior citizens
- **the elderly**
- the old; old lady, old man
- **anti-aging**

APPEARANCE

Recommendations: Patriarchal beauty standards insist that tall and thin bodies are ideal, healthy, and desirable – and that a person's worth is determined by how well they fit this standard. Embrace bodily autonomy for all by refusing to perpetuate height or weight stigma, fat-shaming, or toxic beauty standards in your communications about appearance. It's almost never necessary to describe a person's size, but when it is, use their preferred descriptor, if possible. Avoid assigning moral value to bodies – uphold dignity for all.

👍 SAY THIS	👎 NOT THAT
• **fat** (if it's a person's preferred descriptor)	• obese person, person with obesity
• high weight, low weight	• people affected by obesity, people who struggle with weight, people who suffer from excess weight
• people in larger bodies, people in smaller bodies	• overweight, big boned
• body diversity	• **plus size**
• body neutrality	• **"I feel fat"**
• body acceptance	• **body positivity**
• **snazzy**	• midget, vertically challenged
• **little person, dwarf**	

DISABILITY

Recommendations: Ableism assumes that there's an "ideal" body and mind, and that bodies that deviate from this ideal don't have value. Actively resist this bias. There's usually no need to refer to a person's disability, but when it's essential, choose terminology for the disability that is person-centered or, if preferred by the individual, **identity-first**. Avoid using disability terminology to refer to a situation metaphorically (e.g., "That's so lame"), and don't use language that villainizes or heroizes people with disabilities.

👍 SAY THIS

- neuroatypical
- neurodivergent
- on the autism spectrum
- cognitive disability
- learning disability
- physical disability
- non-visible disability
- deaf, hard of hearing, partial hearing loss, partially deaf
- limited vision, low vision, partially-sighted
- disabled person
- person who has… (bipolar, etc.)
- person who is… (deaf, etc.)
- person with… (multiple sclerosis, etc.)
- …uses a wheelchair
- PWDs (people with disabilities)
- people without disabilities, non-disabled

👎 NOT THAT

- mentally handicapped, handicapped
- mentally retarded, dumb, slow
- **person with autism**
- high functioning, low functioning
- lame
- step up/back, stand up/back
- the deaf, deaf ears, closed ears, tone deaf
- hearing-impaired
- the blind, vision-impaired, visually impaired
- crazy
- schizophrenic
- afflicted by, crippled by, suffering from, victim of…
- wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair, in a wheelchair
- the disabled, differently abled
- **able-bodied**, normal

GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

Recommendations: Sexism pulls for essentialist language, where "innate" characteristics determine gender or sex. Challenge gender binaries and all stereotypes in your communications about gender, sex, and sexuality. Emphasize self-identification, the language that is used by the people you're communicating about; and assume complexity, by representing a person's whole and lived experience without stigma or shame. Be sensitive to context. Though gender binaries are problematic, they're still important terms to describe and combat sexism. Use gender-neutral terms where the meaning is not affected. When telling **transgender people's stories**, use the present-day instead of narrating from any point in the past. Always uplift the whole human experience.

👍 SAY THIS

- transgender person
- trans man, trans woman
- third gender, **hijra**, **muxe**
- **two-spirit**
- crossdresser (if self-identified)
- non-binary
- non-gendered
- agender
- genderless
- genderfluid
- genderqueer
- intersex
- misgendering
- Gender Affirmation Sex Reassignment Surgery, gender confirmation surgery

👎 NOT THAT

- **transgendered**
- a transgender
- transgenders
- transsexual
- transvestite (unless self-identified)
- tranny
- gender-bender
- he-she, she-male
- it
- hermaphrodite
- Gender Identity Disorder (GID)
- sex change, sex change operation
- pre-operative, post-operative

GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY (CONTINUED)

CURIOUS ABOUT PRONOUNS?

Nothing is more personal than a pronoun. While we will make mistakes in a world that has programmed us to accept gender normativity, we can all do our part in using language that is respectful, inclusive, and affirming at work. **Here's** 4 tips to get started!

👍 SAY THIS

- transition, transitioning
- being recognized
- **Mx.**
- they, them, their
- sex work, sex worker
- slut-shaming
- menstruating people
- **birthing parent**, pregnant person
- partner
- **asexual**, aromantic

👎 NOT THAT

- **passing**
- **homosexual**
- non-straight
- sexual preference
- lifestyle choice
- opposite sex, both sexes
- prostitute, whore
- walk of shame
- be a man, man up
- mankind
- "mother of three"
- cleaning lady; male nurse; lady doctor
- fan boy, fan girl
- **women's health**

HEALTH

Recommendations: Access to food, housing, and a healthy environment impacts health outcomes, especially for marginalized groups. Communications about health should always center people and consider questions of access — how health factors that are often framed as an individual problem or personal failing are exacerbated, if not created, by systems of inequity and injustice. Ensure that all people have an active voice in how they experience their health. Avoid framing health problems in a way that invites pity or blame.

👍 SAY THIS

- pro-abortion rights
- abortion rights advocate
- anti-abortion
- unmedicated birth
- well-fed is best
- people with AIDS, people living with AIDS
- risk factor
- sex without a condom/barrier
- person who uses drugs
- living with cancer
- person who has had cancer, person dealing with life after cancer
- people with mental illness
- neurodiversity
- died by suicide

👎 NOT THAT

- **pro-choice**
- pro-life
- natural birth
- breast is best
- AIDS victim, person suffering from AIDS
- **full-blown AIDS**
- high-risk activity
- unsafe/unprotected sex
- drug abuser, drug addict
- **battling cancer**, lost the battle to cancer
- cancer survivor
- the mentally ill
- **chemical imbalance**
- committed suicide

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Recommendations: Dismantling racism requires uprooting it at all levels, from the structural to the linguistic. Conversations on race can only productively proceed with a willingness to be open and learn, make mistakes, and course correct. There is no one-size-fits-all language for talking about race. Personal preference (and context) matters, so use self-identification wherever possible. Position communications from the perspective of the community, not the dominant power structure, and use the most specific terms to describe a person or group. Confer with members of the community you're describing, gut check, and gut check again.

👍 SAY THIS

- marginalized groups
- person, people of color (with **purpose**)
- BIPOC (with **purpose**)
- Black, a Black person
- African American (only if self-identified)
- enslaved people
- **mixed race**, multiracial
- Asian American
- the Roma
- white
- untapped
- at-promise student
- legacy in
- racist, racism
- bigotry
- microaggression

👎 NOT THAT

- minority, minorities
- colorblind
- post-racial
- a black, the blacks
- **you people**, those people
- slaves
- mixed
- exotic
- Oriental (as a *n.*)
- gypsy, gypped
- Caucasian
- underrepresented, underserved
- **at-risk student**
- **grandfathered in**
- **racially-motivated**, racially-charged

RACE AND ETHNICITY (CONTINUED)

👍 SAY THIS

- bias
- oppression, internalized oppression
- white supremacy
- white privilege
- cultural appropriation
- **cultural humility**
- locs
- wide-slat shutters

👎 NOT THAT

- thug
- **radicalized** (unless self-applied)
- cultural competence
- dreadlocks
- plantation shutters

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Recommendations: Xenophobic and monolithic representations of religion are culturally commonplace. Religious and spiritual groups are ethnically, culturally, and ideologically diverse, and communications about them should always take this complexity into account. Assume nothing when it comes to a person's religion. Ask questions, use self-identified terms, and err on the side of over-explaining. Stories about religion and spirituality should seek to understand and frame global, interconnected forms of injustice.

👍 SAY THIS

- Muslim (as a *n.*)
- Islamophobia
- Quran
- Jew (as a *n.*)
- Ashkenazi
- Sephardi
- God, **G-d, HaShem**
- Hanukkah
- antisemitism
- murti, icon, image
- patronus
- interfaith
- religious pluralism
- Hellene
- witch
- occult
- **Vodou**
- astrology

👎 NOT THAT

- Muslim extremist, Islamic terrorist, jihadist, Islamist, radical Islam
- **Black Muslim** (unless self-identified)
- **the Muslim community**
- Sharia law
- Koran
- Jew (as an *adj.* or *adv.*)
- **anti-Semitism**
- **Judeo-Christian tradition**, Judeo-Christian heritage
- **karma** (when used incorrectly)
- **idol**, idol worship
- **spirit animal** (unless you're Indigenous)
- **pagan**, neo-pagan (unless self-identified)
- magic, sorcery (if framed as invalid)
- voodoo
- myth, folklore, superstition (if framed as invalid)

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Recommendations: Classism is deeply entrenched in the English language and disinclusive by nature. While it's important to be mindful of how classist metaphors infiltrate the stories we tell about people, work, and everyday life, it's also important to recognize that people aspire to build a material foundation that enables them to be free. Communications about socioeconomic status should strive to tell multidimensional stories about people and their experiences. Use **asset-based**, rather than deficit-based, language.

👍 SAY THIS

- equity
- economic opportunity
- financial stability
- **works in the home**
- people who have a grade school education
- low-income (as an *adj.*)
- people experiencing material poverty
- acute financial distress
- people who receive TANF
- giving families the tools they need
- strengthening families
- **unhoused**, people without housing, people experiencing homelessness
- people in emergency shelter, people in transitional housing
- **emergency housing relief center**
- global stratification

👎 NOT THAT

- work ethic
- **professionalism**
- real job, honest living
- doesn't work
- **lazy**
- unskilled labor
- the poor, disadvantaged, less fortunate, poverty-stricken, poverty-ridden
- in need, needy
- welfare-reliant
- giving families the resources they need
- supporting families
- broken home
- those kids
- culture of poverty
- the projects
- the homeless
- homeless shelter
- classy

NEED SOME HELP?

For more than a decade, Brilliant Ink has worked with companies large and small, across a range of industries, to assess and improve their employee experiences. Because our team is small and specialized, we're able to tailor our approach and move quickly to deliver meaningful solutions.

When you work with us, nothing is off the shelf – we can dial up or dial down our recommendations based on your organization's reality, resources, and priorities.

THANK YOU!

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