Avoiding Insensitive and Offensive Language

This essay is intended as a general guide to language that can, intentionally or not, cause offense or perpetuate discriminatory values and practices by emphasizing the differences between people or implying that one group is superior to another. Its purpose is to make dictionary users aware of the possible consequences of the words they choose. Before looking at the words themselves, it is important to note that offensive or insensitive speech is not limited to a specific group of words. One can be hurtful and insulting by using any type of vocabulary, if that is one's intent. While in most cases it is easy to avoid blatantly offensive slurs and comments, more subtle bias that is an inherent part of our language or that is the habit of a lifetime is much harder to change.

Certain words are labeled in Random House Webster's College Dictionary as vulgar, offensive, or disparaging. Words in these categories, which include those referring to sexual or excretory functions and racial, ethnic, or social groups, are usually inappropriate and should be treated with caution. While there are some circumstances where these words are accepted, there are many others where their use can be hurtful and upsetting.

Other factors complicate the question. A group may disagree within itself as to what is acceptable and what is not. Many seemingly inoffensive terms develop negative connotations over time and become dated or go out of style as awareness changes. A "within the group" rule often applies, which allows a member of a group to use terms freely that would be considered offensive if used by a non-member of the group.

What is considered acceptable shifts constantly as people become more aware of language and its power. The rapid changes of the last few decades have left many people puzzled and afraid of unintentionally insulting someone. At the same time, these changes have angered others, who decry what they see as extremes of "political correctness" in rules and locutions that alter language to the point of obscuring, even destroying, its meaning. The abandonment of traditional usages has also upset many people. But while it is true that some of the more extreme attempts to avoid offending language have resulted in ludicrous obfuscation (is "animal companion" necessary as a replacement for "pet"?), it is also true that heightened sensitivity in language is a statement of respect, indicates precision of thought, and is a positive move toward rectifying the unequal social status between one group and another.

Sexism

Sexism is the most difficult bias to avoid, in part because of the convention of using man or men and he or his to refer to people of either sex. Other, more disrespectful conventions include giving descriptions of women in terms of age and appearance while describing men in terms of accomplishment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid This</th>
<th>Use This Instead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mankind, man</td>
<td>human beings, humans, humankind, humanity,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>people, society, men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man-made</td>
<td>synthetic, artificial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man in the street</td>
<td>average person, ordinary person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using gender-neutral terms for occupations, positions, roles, etc.
Terms that specify a particular sex can unnecessarily perpetuate certain stereotypes when used generically.

**Avoid This**
- anchorman
- bellman, bellboy
- businessman
- chairman
- cleaning lady, girl, maid
- clergyman
- clergymen
- congressman
- fireman
- forefather
- girl/gal Friday
- housewife
- insurance man
- layman
- mailman, postman
- policeman
- salesman, saleswoman, saleslady, salesgirl
- spokesman
- stewardess, steward
- weatherman
- workman
- actress

**Use This Instead**
- anchor
- bellhop
- businessperson, executive, manager, business owner, retailer, etc.
- chair, chairperson
- housecleaner, housekeeper, cleaning person, office cleaner
- member of the clergy, rabbi, priest, etc.
- the clergy
- representative, member of Congress, legislator
- firefighter
- ancestor
- assistant
- homemaker
- insurance agent
- layperson, nonspecialist, nonprofessional
- mail or letter carrier
- police officer or law enforcement officer
- salesperson, sales representative, sales associate, clerk
- spokesperson, representative
- flight attendant
- weather reporter, weathercaster, meteorologist
- worker
- actor

**Replacing the pronoun he**
Like man, the generic use of he can be seen to exclude women.

**Avoid This**
When a driver approaches a red light, he must prepare to stop.
When a driver approaches a red light, he or she must prepare to stop.

**Use This Instead**
When drivers approach a red light, they must prepare to stop.
When approaching a red light, a driver must prepare to stop.
Referring to members of both sexes with parallel names, titles, or descriptions
Don't be inconsistent unless you are trying to make a specific point.

Avoid This
- men and ladies
- Betty Schmidt, an attractive 49-year-old physician, and her husband, Alan Schmidt, a noted editor
- Mr. David Kim and Mrs. Betty Harrow

Use This Instead
- men and women, ladies and gentlemen
- Betty Schmidt, a physician, and her husband, Alan Schmidt, an editor
- Mr. David Kim and Ms. Betty Harrow (unless Mrs. is her known preference)

man and wife
Dear Sir:

Mrs. Smith and President Jones → Governor Smith and President Jones

Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

Some words and phrases that refer to racial and ethnic groups are clearly offensive. Other words (e.g., Oriental, colored) are outdated or inaccurate. Hispanic is generally accepted as a broad term for Spanish-speaking people of the Western Hemisphere, but more specific terms (Latino, Mexican American) are also acceptable and in some cases preferred.

Avoid This
- Negro, colored, Afro-American
- Oriental, Asiatic
- Indian
- Eskimo
- native (n.)

Use This Instead
- black, African-American (generally preferred to Afro-American)
- Asian or more specific designation such as Pacific Islander, Chinese American, Korean
- Indian properly refers to people who live in or come from India.
  - American Indian, Native American, and more specific designations (Chinook, Hopi) are usually preferred when referring to the native peoples of the Western hemisphere.
- Inuit, Alaska Natives
- native peoples, early inhabitants, aboriginal peoples (but not aborigines)

Age

The concept of aging is changing as people are living longer and more active lives. Be aware of word choices that reinforce stereotypes (decrepit, senile) and avoid mentioning age unless it is relevant.

Avoid This
- elderly, aged, old, geriatric, the elderly, the aged

Use This Instead
- older person, senior citizen(s), older people, seniors
### Sexual Orientation

The term *homosexual* to describe a man or woman is increasingly replaced by the terms *gay* for men and *lesbian* for women. *Homosexual* as a noun is sometimes used only in reference to a male. Among homosexuals, certain terms (such as *queer* and *dyke*) that are usually considered offensive have been gaining currency in recent years. However, it is still prudent to avoid these terms in standard contexts.

### Avoiding Depersonalization of Persons with Disabilities or Illnesses

Terminology that emphasizes the person rather than the disability is generally preferred. *Handicap* is used to refer to the environmental barrier that affects the person. (Stairs handicap a person who uses a wheelchair.) While words such as *crazy*, *demented*, and *insane* are used in facetious or informal contexts, these terms are not used to describe people with clinical diagnoses of mental illness. The euphemisms *challenged*, *differently abled*, and *special* are preferred by some people, but are often ridiculed and are best avoided.

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mongoloid</td>
<td>person with Down syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wheelchair-bound</td>
<td>person who uses a wheelchair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS sufferer, person afflicted with AIDS, AIDS</td>
<td>person living with AIDS, P.W.A., HIV+, (one who tests positive for HIV but does not show symptoms of AIDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>victim</td>
<td>has/had polio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>polio victim</td>
<td>persons with disabilities or person who uses crutches or more specific description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the handicapped, the disabled, cripple</td>
<td>deaf person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Avoiding Patronizing or Demeaning Expressions

These are expressions which can offend, regardless of intention. References to age, sex, religion, race, and the like should only be included if they are relevant.

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<tr>
<td>girls (when referring to adult women), the fair sex</td>
<td>women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sweetie, dear, dearie, honey</td>
<td>(usually not appropriate with strangers or in public situations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old maid, bachelorette, spinster</td>
<td>single woman, woman, divorced woman (but only if one would specify &quot;divorced man&quot; in the same context)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the little woman, old lady, ball and chain boy (when referring to or addressing an adult man)</td>
<td>wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>man, sir</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Avoiding Language That Excludes or Unnecessarily Emphasizes Differences**

References to age, sex, religion, race, and the like should be included only if they are relevant.

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<tr>
<td>lawyers and their wives</td>
<td>lawyers and their spouses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a secretary and her boss</td>
<td>a secretary and boss, a secretary and his or her boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the male nurse</td>
<td>the nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab man denies assault charge</td>
<td>Man denies assault charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the articulate black student</td>
<td>the articulate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Curie was a great woman scientist</td>
<td>Marie Curie was a great scientist (unless the intent is to compare her only with other women in the sciences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian name</td>
<td>given name, personal name, first name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Johnson, the black representative, met with the President today to discuss civil-rights legislation.</td>
<td>Mr. Johnson, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, met with the President today to discuss civil-rights legislation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>