

NASW Press Guidelines for Describing People

To provide implementation strategies for its policy on unbiased communication, the NASW Press has developed the following guidelines. The purposes of the guidelines are to help authors

- ♦ portray people as accurately and vividly as possible
- ♦ eliminate bias from their writing
- ♦ incorporate the richness of cultural diversity
- ♦ use language that is accessible and inviting to the reader.

All languages evolve over time, and it is likely that English will evolve to incorporate new terms for and better ways of describing people. In the meantime, the NASW Press expects authors and staff to follow the guidelines outlined in this document.

General Guidelines

Seek and use the preference of the people you write about.

Ask people you are working with how they prefer to be described and use the terms they give you. If, as often happens, people within a group disagree on preference, report the different terms and try to use the one most often used within the group. The NASW Press does not object to using alternate terms, such as black and African American, within one article or chapter as long as the content is clearly written so that readers are not confused. Be sensitive to real preferences and do not adopt descriptions that may have been imposed on people. For example, older people may say, "Oh, we're just senior citizens."

Be as specific as possible.

If you have studied work experiences among Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans, report on those three groups; do not lump them together as *Hispanics*. Whenever possible, use specific racial or ethnic identities instead of collecting different groups under a general heading. If you have researched drug use among a group of people whose ages range from 65 to 75, cite their ages rather than reporting on "drug use among older people."

Describe people in the positive.

Describe people in terms of what they are, instead of what they are not. For example, do not use the terms *nonwhite* or *nonparticipant*. Remember that you are writing about people.

Help the reader see that you are writing about people, not subjects or objects. Use the terms sample or subject for statistics and describe participants as *respondents*, *participants*, *workers*, and so forth. Keep in mind that a group of 100 people who share certain characteristics also have many traits unique to them, even though those individual traits are not included in your report. Pretend that you are a member of the group about whom you are writing and see how you would react to the terms you have used to describe them.

Avoid using terms that label people.

When adjectives that describe a person's condition or status are used as nouns, they become labels that often connote a derogatory intent. For example, people who do not earn enough money to provide for their needs are often referred to collectively as the poor; use poor people if you are referring to them in the aggregate. People who have lived a long time become *the elderly* or *the aged*; if you cannot use specific ages or age ranges, use terms such as elders or older people. Do not refer to people with disabilities as *the disabled* or *the handicapped*. Note that the use of "the" in front of a noun is a good warning sign that you may be using a label.

Guidelines for Specific Populations

Age

Use *boy* and *girl* only for children and adolescents, although even for high school students, *young man* and *young woman* may be preferable. Do not use terms such as *senior citizen* or *oldster* for people who are older than 65. Use *aging* and *elderly* as adjectives, not as nouns.

Class

Classism often creeps into our language. Instead of assigning class to people, you should describe their situations. This does not mean that you should pretend all people have the same socioeconomic advantages, but that you should describe the advantages or lack of advantages, rather than assigning attributes to the people.

Poor Usage	Better Usage
lower class	people who are poor
underclass	with low incomes
upper class	with high incomes
the disadvantaged	with socioeconomic disadvantages

Classism often is combined with bias toward people in terms of race or ethnicity; consequently, it is doubly important to take care with language that might perpetuate discrimination.

Disability

Remember that people *have* disabilities, they are not the disabilities; in addition, the disabilities may be barriers, such as stairs or curbs, that handicap people. The following are some commonly misused terms:

Poor Usage	Better Usage
the handicapped	people with disabilities
schizophrenics	people diagnosed with schizophrenia
challenged	person who has ___
wheelchair-bound	uses a wheelchair
the blind	people who are blind
hearing impaired	hard of hearing or deaf

HIV/AIDS

Say *people with AIDS*, not *AIDS victims* or *innocent victims of AIDS*. Avoid language that may imply a moral judgment on behavior or lifestyles. Instead of *high-risk groups*, which suggests that demographic traits may be responsible for AIDS exposure, use *high-risk behavior*.

Race and Ethnicity

Issues and Dilemmas

Traditionally, authors in the social sciences have used *minority* as a shorthand term to describe people of various races and ethnicities collectively. In these cases the term has been used in the sense of a smaller number or a population that has been oppressed or subjected to differential treatment. Authors also have used *white* and *nonwhite*, particularly in research papers, to differentiate between population groups. *Nonwhite* appears to have been used to describe collectively a diverse group of people who differ in some ways from the greater number of a population.

Another complicating factor is that not all people within specific populations agree on nomenclature, and many people use different definitions for the same words. For example, some people prefer *African American*; others within the same population say, "I am not African American; I am *black*." Some scholars use the term *race* to describe broad classifications of people who are presumed to have common descent and share certain physical characteristics (generally American Indian, Asian, black, and white) and reserve *ethnicity* for people who share common culture, religion, or language (often people from specific nations or countries). Others use the terms interchangeably. Some eliminate the term *race* entirely because they believe it is racist in itself.

Guidelines

Styles and preferences for nouns that refer to race and ethnicity change over time. The general guidelines for discussing all people are particularly helpful when you are describing race and ethnicity. Try to ascertain what the population group prefers and use that term; recognize and acknowledge that there may be disagreement about preference within the group. Whenever possible, be as specific as possible and describe individual population groups rather than collecting many different groups under an umbrella term. If the people in your study included Asian Americans, Hispanics, black Americans, and white Americans, do not compare the first three groups as a set with the last group. Describe them each as individual groups. If you researched experiences of a group of Asian Americans who included Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, you should describe each national origin group individually.

You should avoid both *minority* and *nonwhite*. Many people who are described this way view the terms as pejorative and discriminatory. In addition, assuming that white people are the predominant population group is an inaccurate portrayal of most countries in the world and indeed of many areas in the United States. Some people prefer the use of people of color; however, you should be aware that this term also is imprecise and that not all people who might be included in the group under such a heading would describe themselves in this way.

Black and *white* are adjectives that should be used (in lowercase only unless they begin a sentence) to modify nouns, such as "black Americans" or "black men" or "white women." *African Americans*, *American Indians*, *Asian Americans*, and *Hispanics* are all proper nouns that should be capitalized; hyphens should never be inserted in multiword names even when the names are modifiers. Some individuals prefer to use Latino, instead of Hispanic, as the descriptive term for people of Latin American ancestry, and some use the two together. There has been considerable discussion about the use of *American Indian* versus *Native American*; many people prefer the former because it is a more precise term for the population in North America. Although the U.S. government combines *Asian* and *Pacific Islander*, most Pacific Islanders prefer that they be separated.

Poor Usage	Better Usage
minorities	specific population or "racial and ethnic groups"

tribes	people or nations
blacks	black people
nonwhites	specific populations

In addition to taking care with names of racial and ethnic groups, you should be careful with modifiers. For example, the passage "we compared the reactions of African American and Hispanic men with middle-class white men" suggests that the first two groups are in a different socioeconomic status, and given historical stereotyping, the perception is likely to be that they are in a lower status. Specify the status for all participants in your study. Describing someone as "the accomplished African American student" may suggest that this student is an exception. Describe people in terms of race or ethnicity only when the description is pertinent to the discussion.

Sex

Sexist language has no place in the professional literature. The most obvious manifestation of sexist language is the use of masculine pronouns, and there are numerous ways to avoid their use. One option is to use plural forms whenever possible. If you are writing a text or a how-to article, using the second person to address the reader directly will help you avoid having to select a masculine or feminine form and is likely to make the article more appealing to the reader. You can often substitute *we* for *he* and *our* or *their* for *his*. Another solution is to eliminate pronouns entirely. Inserting *him* or *her* or *he* or *she* throughout an article becomes cumbersome, although sparing use can sound natural. Do not use contrived forms such as *s/he* or *he/she*. In general, avoid alternating masculine and feminine pronouns within an article. Rather than demonstrating equality, the practice can suggest that they are interchangeable, and it is confusing to the reader.

Poor Usage	Better Usage
the social worker	social workers
will find that he	will find that they
he calls his children "kids"	we call our children "kids"
the teacher should encourage his students to write	encourage your students to write

Avoid words that suggest an overtone of judgment, that describe women in patronizing terms ("the little lady") or suggest second-class status ("authoress") or demean a woman's ability ("lady lawyer") or are rarely used to describe men ("coed"). Take care not to suggest that women are possessions of men or that they cannot carry out a role or perform a job that men do.

Poor Usage	Better Usage
policemen	police officers
man a project	staff a project
chairman	chair
housewife	homemaker

mankind	humans, human beings
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It is not necessary or desirable to construct feminine versions of words that carry a masculine connotation. *Chair* or *representative* substitute much better for *chairman* or *spokesman* than *chairwoman* or *spokeswoman*. Do not specify sex unless it is a variable or it is essential to the discussion. Be sure to use parallel construction: *men* and *women*, not *men* and *females* or *girls* and *men*. *Men* and *women* are nouns, whereas *female* and *male* are best used as adjectives.

Sexual Orientation

Orientation is a state of being, and *preference* is a choice; consequently, you should not use the latter to refer to heterosexuality or homosexuality. The NASW Press uses the term *homosexual* only as an adjective. You should use *lesbians*, *gay men*, or *bisexual men* or *women* to refer to people whose orientation is not exclusively heterosexual.

It is important to distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. Consequently, you would not write "the client reported homosexual fantasies," but would substitute "the client reported same-gender sexual fantasies." The appropriate terms to use in describing sexual activity include *female-female*, *male-male*, and *same-gender*, in addition to *male-female*.

Accurate Historical Reporting

In their zeal to use appropriate language, authors sometimes try to change history. If you are quoting any document, you must quote it exactly as the words were written or said; and if you are describing a historical situation, you will likely want to use the words that were used in that context. You should, however, make the context clear. If you find the language too egregious, you may want to add a footnote saying this is not your language, but the language of the time in which it was written.

Clear, Accessible Writing

You are writing to communicate facts and ideas. Because you are writing for journals in the social sciences, you probably want to communicate those facts and ideas with the intent of improving human lives. To do so, you must write in such a way that you will engage readers so that they will absorb your content enough to use it.

There is no question that eliminating the old shorthand for describing people will add some length to a paper. Substituting *members of racial and ethnic groups* for *minorities* or *people with disabilities* for the *disabled* adds words, but it is more accurate and it eliminates bias. You can easily compensate for the additional length by practicing the principles of good writing. Use strong active verbs and eliminate all convoluted passive constructions. Strike out qualifiers and other redundancies:

Redundant	Simplified
successfully avoided	avoided
has the capability of	can
particularly unique	unique
most often is the case that	often is

Do not resort to euphemisms, which will weaken your message. Taking care to portray people with accuracy and sensitivity should enhance your critical analysis, not muddy it. The more clearly and simply you write, the easier you will make it for your readers to grasp complex ideas. Bring life to your writing by concentrating on the message. If you portray the people you are discussing vividly and truthfully, you will probably communicate the problems and solutions clearly.