MIT Press Guidelines for Bias-free Language
last updated February 22, 2021

This living document is subject to revision. What follows are suggestions based on recommendations from various guides and advocacy groups.

HELPFUL LINKS
https://consciousstyleguide.com/
https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/
https://www.aaja.org/aajahandbook
https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguide
https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-frequently-asked-questions/
https://www.glaad.org/reference/lgbtq
https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender
https://wwwafb.org/publications/jvib/jvib-authors/afb-style-guidelines#terminology

ABILITY/DISABILITY STATUS
Avoid using language that casts disabilities as negative. For example, avoid using phrases such as “suffers from,” “afflicted with,” or “victim of”; avoid using the terms “handicapped,” “challenged,” and “crippled.”

Note: Most disabilities are not diseases. Do not refer to a person with a disability as a patient unless that person is in a hospital or care facility. In the context of occupational or physical therapy, the term “client” is preferable.

- Outdated: normal, able-bodied,* healthy, or whole
  Preferred: “nondisabled” is the preferred term for people without disabilities.
  [*“able-bodied”: “appropriate term to use in some cases, such as government reports on the proportion of able-bodied members in the workforce. In some cases, the word ‘typical’ can be used to describe a nondisabled condition, although be aware that some in the disability community object to its use.”—https://ncdj.org/style-guide]
- Outdated: blind person, “dumb”
  Preferred: person who is blind/visually impaired
- Outdated: deaf person, deaf-and-dumb, deaf-mute
  Preferred: person who is deaf or hard-of-hearing; member of the Deaf community* (Note: *On “deaf” vs. “Deaf,” see https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-frequently-asked-questions/)
- Outdated: dumb, speech impediment
  Preferred: person with a speech/communication impairment
- Outdated: retarded, slow, brain-damaged, special education student
  Preferred: person who is learning disabled, person who has a cognitive disability, person with a learning or cognitive disability, person with intellectual and developmental disability
- Outdated: mentally ill, hypersensitive, psycho, crazy, insane
  Preferred: person with a psychiatric disability, person with a mental health condition
- Outdated: handicapped, physically challenged, invalid, “special,” cripple, wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair, lame
Preferred: wheelchair user, person who is wheelchair mobile, physically disabled, quadriplegic, paraplegic

- Outdated: emotionally disturbed
  Preferred: person who identifies as having an emotional disability; person seeking help for emotional mental health

- Outdated: victim, someone “stricken with” a disability (e.g., “someone stricken with cancer” or “an AIDS victim”)
  Preferred: person “living with” a specific disability or illness (e.g., “someone living with cancer or AIDS”)

**Note:** “Afflicted with,” “stricken with,” “suffers from,” “victim of,” and “confined to” are terms based on the assumption that a person with a disability is living a reduced quality of life. Use neutral language when describing a person who has a disability.

See also [https://ncdj.org/style-guide](https://ncdj.org/style-guide)

**AGE**

- Outdated: seniors, senior citizens; elders*
  Preferred: older individuals, older people, older adults

**Note:** “elders” may be appropriate in some contexts


**ECONOMIC CLASS AND IMMIGRANT STATUS**

- Outdated: poor person, person from the ghetto, poverty-stricken person
  Preferred: person who lacks advantages that others have; low economic status related to a person’s education, occupation, and income; person living at or below the poverty line, person experiencing poverty; person whose income is below the federal poverty threshold

- Outdated: the homeless
  Preferred: people experiencing homelessness

- Outdated: “welfare queen,” welfare mothers, welfare reliant
  Preferred: person who receives TANF benefits; person receiving government assistance; person receiving [specific benefit]

- Outdated: illegal alien
  Preferred: Undocumented* immigrant or worker; person who is undocumented; person seeking asylum, refugee; person who lacks documents required for legal immigration

**Note:** Although preferable to “illegal” (calling someone illegal implies they are an object), “undocumented” fails to recognize the person’s humanity first.


**RACE, ETHNICITY, CULTURE**

- Outdated: negro, negroid, colored person, dark
  Preferred: Black, African American

- Outdated: colored, nonwhite
  Preferred: people of color

**Note:** In the US context, “people of color” usually refers to Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Latinx, Hispanic, African American, and biracial/multiracial people. It should not be used synonymously with “Black” or “African American,” “BIPOC” (Black, Indigenous, people of color), though it may make sense in some contexts, is better replaced by a term referring more specifically to the relevant group.
Note on capitalization: capitalizing “Black” is preferred. “White” can be either capitalized or lowercase (there are many arguments for both sides).

- Outdated: American (assumes the US is the only country inside three regions of North America, Central America, South America)
  Preferred: US citizen or resident of the US; or, depending on context, North American, Central American, or South American
- Outdated: Africa, which is a continent of many countries
  Preferred: use the specific name of the country on the continent; e.g., Egypt, Ethiopia

Note: “African” is a broad term. Citizens prefer to identify with their country of origin.

- Outdated: Arabs
  Preferred: Western Asian, Northern African people

Note: From APA guidelines: “When writing about people of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent, state the nation of origin (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel) when possible. In some cases, people of MENA descent who claim Arab ancestry and reside in the United States may be referred to as ‘Arab Americans.’ In all cases, it is best to allow individuals to self-identify.”

- Outdated: Caucasian people
  Preferred: White people, European-American individuals, Western people
- Outdated: foreigners
  Preferred: international people; person from [specific country]
- Outdated: mixed race people, mulatto
  Preferred: biracial people, multiracial individuals (when it is relevant to the discussion)
- Outdated: Orientals
  Preferred: Asian people, Asian American individuals, person from [specific country]
- Outdated: Spanish people (only appropriate for people from Spain; and, therefore, imprecise when referring to people from Latin, Central or South America)
  Preferred: person from [specific country]; Hispanic; Latino/a; Latinx people

Note: From APA guidelines: “When writing about people who identify as Hispanic, Latino (or Latinx, etc.), Chicano, or another related designation, authors should consult with their participants to determine the appropriate choice.” See also: https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/11/about-one-in-four-u-s-hispanics-have-heard-of-latinx-but-just-3-use-it/

- Outdated: Indians (when referring to Indigenous American people unless the person indicates that they preferred to be identified as Indian)
  Preferred: Native Americans, Indigenous people, First Nations people (often referring to native Canadians)
- Outdated: Eskimo
  Preferred: Inuit, Inupiaq, Yupik (see https://uaf.edu/anlc/resources/inuit_or eskimo.php)

See also https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

- Outdated: sexual preference
  Preferred: sexual orientation, sexual identity
- Outdated: homosexual
  Preferred: sexual minorities, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA)
- Outdated: alternative “lifestyle” (when referring to sexuality)
  Preferred: gay, lesbian; same gender loving (SGL)(appropriate in contexts where the group self-identifies as SGL)
• Outdated: hermaphrodites
  Preferred: people with intersex characteristics, individuals with ambiguous sexual organs

Note: The term “intersex” is not interchangeable with or a synonym for “transgender.”

• Outdated: sex change
  Preferred: sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), gender reaffirming surgery, gender confirming surgery

Pronouns


• If someone goes by two pronouns, make sure to use both when writing about that person.

Gender-neutral pronouns: they, them, their, theirs, themself.
Their associated verbs conjugate as they would for the plural.

If you see the following used, they are acceptable gender-neutral pronouns:
sie, hir, hirs, hire, hirself
zie, zir, zirs, zirself

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<th>use</th>
<th>pronounce as</th>
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<td>zie</td>
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<td>him/her</td>
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<td></td>
<td>zir</td>
<td>like “sir” with a “z”</td>
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<td>like “sirs” with a “z”</td>
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<td>hirself</td>
<td>“here-self”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zirself</td>
<td>Like “sir-self” with a “z”</td>
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See also https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/trans/transgender/pronouns/

• Outdated: girls (when referring to adult women)
  Preferred: women

• Outdated: female (as noun)
  Preferred: women

• Outdated: manpower
  Preferred: workforce, personnel, workers

• Outdated: mankind
  Preferred: humankind

• Outdated: the average man
  Preferred: the average person, people in general, lay person

• Outdated: chairman
  Preferred: chairperson, chair, moderator, discussion leader

• Outdated: freshmen
  Preferred: first-year students

• Outdated: foreman, policeman, stewardess, housewife, mailman
  Preferred: supervisor, police officer, flight attendant, homemaker, postal worker/mail carrier

• Outdated: women’s lib, women’s libber
  Preferred: Women’s movement, Equal Rights movement, feminist, supporter of women’s rights
Outdated: mothering, fathering
Preferred: parenting, nurturing

Outdated: opposite sex
Preferred: other sex

Outdated: biological/genetic/„normal“ gender
Preferred: cisgender/cissexual/cis

**Note:** **Cisgender:** A range of different identities wherein a person is comfortable identifying with the sex or gender they were assigned at birth.

Outdated: biological/genetic/„normal“ sex
Preferred: assigned sex

Outdated: „real“ gender, „real“ girl, „real“ boy
Preferred: affirmed gender, affirmed girl, affirmed boy

**WEIGHT/HEIGHT**

Outdated: obese, overweight people*
Preferred: people of size

**Note:** *The terms „obese“ and „overweight“ may be appropriate in medical contexts: “Only use the terms „overweight“ and „obesity“ when referring to specific medical conditions in the context of providing public health-related information“ ([https://www.self.com/story/self-weight-health-style-guide](https://www.self.com/story/self-weight-health-style-guide)). „Fat,“ a historically derogatory term, is increasingly being reclaimed by people of size and their allies.

Outdated: dwarf, midget
Preferred: someone of short stature, little person

**INCARCERATED PEOPLE**

Outdated: inmate*
Preferred: person in prison, incarcerated person

**Note:** *The term „inmate“ has been in use for so long that some still prefer it, but many consider it derogatory. See [https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/04/03/inmate-prisoner-other-discussed](https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/04/03/inmate-prisoner-other-discussed): transcript of *Ear Hustle, episode 39, “Us and Them.”*