Inclusive Language Guidelines

You should always write with the knowledge that your audience includes many people with diverse backgrounds. To account for these different experiences, here are some guidelines offered by MLA that can be applied to all writing, regardless of citation style.

Make references to identity relevant

If you are using descriptions that refer to someone's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability, age, or socioeconomic status, make sure that it is relevant to the content and point that is being made. Depending on the context, inclusion of these descriptors can be insensitive because it implies that the status is abnormal. In addition, use gender-neutral language in your writing. Gender specific terms involve assuming someone's gender identity, so it is better to use gender neutral terms. For example, instead of saying "man-made" you could say "human-made." For this reason, avoid using gender specific terms such as waiter or actress as well.

Be precise

Avoid using broad terms that are overgeneralized and conflate different groups together. For example, instead of saying "the Muslim community," a more specific description would be "Sunni Muslims in India." Avoid making assumptions, using stereotypes, or making generalized statements about different populations. Never assume that your audience shares the same understanding of terms and concepts.

Choose terms of identity that respect the subject

Use people-first language so that your subject is not defined by one characteristic or condition. For example, it is typically more appropriate to refer to someone as "a person with autism" rather than "an autistic person." There are some people who prefer language that is identity-first, as in the example "a person with autism." If the subject has made this preference clear, then it is okay to use language that reflects this. However, if preferences for the subject are unknown, it is more appropriate to default to people-first language.

Be thoughtful about capitalization and styling

When appropriate, choose either the lowercased or capitalized version of a term denoting identity and be consistent. If the preference of the subject is known (as might be the case if you are citing personal communications, or if the source states it) always adhere to their preference. Avoid language and punctuation that undermines a person's identity, such as inappropriate quotation marks or italics.

Minimize the use of pronouns that exclude

Always use the pronouns that are preferred by the person in question. If you do not know the preferred pronouns, then use the plural, gender-neutral pronoun they/them/their. Avoid using "we" and "our" pronouns unless it is very clear who is included in this group and why. Using this language can be exclusive because it assumes that the audience shares the writer's perspective and makes anyone who does not align with the writer's statement an outlier.

Avoid negatively judging other experiences

Do not assume that different statuses, specifically conditions related to ability and health conditions, are detrimental to the subject. Language such as "suffers from" or "is a victim of" should be avoided.

Use a dictionary to check for offensive terms

If you are unsure if a term that you're about to use is offensive, refer to the most recent dictionary. Not all offensive terms are listed because of how language quickly changes, so be aware of the different connotations a word has before you use it. **A dictionary is one method of checking for appropriate language**, but it is certainly not the only way. If you must use an offensive word for quoting, you could make a note about the word being offensive, use a dash to avoid fully reproducing the word, or use an alternative in your own writing after quoting. For examples and further instruction, see chapter 3 in the MLA 9 Handbook.

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.

Sources Consulted: Purdue OWL, MLA 9 Handbook