Language of Difference:
Writing about Race, Ethnicity, Social Class, and Disability

When writing about groups of people, it can be difficult to know what language to use. We humans categorize each other as a way to describe and assign differences, including differences of race, ethnicity, social class, disability, gender, and sexual orientation. How do we discuss these categories respectfully? How do we avoid perpetuating stereotypes? A complicating factor is the constant evolution of language; what was acceptable a few years ago may not be acceptable today. In addition, people disagree about what language is appropriate. Other complicating factors include the speaker's purposes, variations across subject fields, individual professors' preferences, and a paper's audience and level of formality. Language is fluid. As a writer, understand and take responsibility for the language choices you make. This handout is an effort to help guide writers in the choice of acceptable language to use when writing about groups of people. <u>General advice</u>:

- <u>Assume a wide audience</u>, and think about the effect of the terms you use on your audience. Do the terms imply a judgment? Are the terms likely to offend? If so, rephrase.

- Take responsibility for your language choices. The first time using a term that might be misinterpreted/considered inappropriate, <u>include a rationale for your choice</u>, such as by adding a footnote that specifically defines the term for your purposes and context.

- <u>Use only the language that is necessary to the context</u>: use "female firefighters" only if you are specifically discussing that gender in that profession. Differences should be noted only when relevant.

- <u>Avoid terms that evaluate</u>, that might imply inferiority/superiority, such as "low class."

- <u>Use the appropriate degree of specificity</u>: "Dominicans" rather than "Hispanics."

- <u>Focus on people</u> rather than on a method of categorization: "people with mental illness" rather than "the mentally ill."

- When discussing some subjects, you may need to use dated terminology in discussing the subject in historical context, but use contemporary language in your analysis.

If unsure of what language to use, consult with your professor, classmates, and current academic readings in the discipline.

RACE/ETHNICITY

The concepts of race and ethnicity are two ways that humans classify each other, often to define and distinguish differences. These classifications are highly complicated; sometimes they are used for positive reasons and other times not. Be aware that the meaning of these concepts and the specific language used change depending on contextual factors, including the speaker, the audience, and the speaker's purposes.

As a writer and speaker,

- Use terms that focus on people rather than on the method of categorization:

  people with disabilities rather than *disabled people; enslaved peoples* rather than *slaves*

- Be as specific as possible. When writing about a group, refer to the specific group:

  People of Korean descent rather than *Asians; Dominicans* rather than *Hispanics*.

- Avoid the term *minority* if possible. *Minority* is often used to describe groups of people who are not part of the majority. This term is being phased out because it may imply inferiority and because *minorities* often are not in the numerical minority. An alternative might be *historically marginalized populations*. If avoiding the term is not possible, qualify the term with the appropriate specific descriptor: *religious minority* NOT *minority*

- Note that the terms *people of color* and *non-white* are acceptable in some fields and some contexts and not in others. Check with your professor if you're uncertain whether a term is acceptable.

- *Hispanic* is typically used to refer to anyone from a Spanish-speaking background. The term *white* sometimes includes people who identify as Hispanic. Note, however, that many Hispanics do not identify as white.

- The terms *Latino/Latina/Latin* are used mostly in the US to refer to US residents with ties to Latin America.

- Capitalize racial/ethnic groups: *Black, Asian, Native American*. Depending on context, *white* may or may not be capitalized.

- Do not hyphenate a phrase when used as a noun, but use a hyphen when two or more words are used together to form an adjective:

  African Americans migrated to northern cities. (noun)

  African-American literature. (adjective)

Remember that language is evolving and context-dependent. When unsure what language to use, consult your professor, classmates, and current academic readings in the discipline.

SOCIAL CLASS

• "Class" refers to a group of people: a single person is not a class (but may belong to it). If you cannot avoid using the term 'class,' use it as a noun, not an adjective:

   ex., Jessica belongs to the upper class NOT *Jessica is upper class.*

• Avoid using terms like "high class" or "low class," or even "upper class" or "lower class," because they have been used historically in an evaluative way. Also avoid "low brow" and "high brow."
   Instead, when using adjectives like "high" or "low," it is preferable to use the term "high" or "low socioeconomic status" so as to avoid judgmental language.

• The word "status" (without the qualifier of "socioeconomic") is not interchangeable with "class" because 'status' can refer to other measures such as popularity.

• When possible, use specific metrics: common ones include level of educational attainment, occupation, income. Use specific language that describes what is important to the analysis/ discussion: *ex., living below the poverty line NOT poor.*

• Be aware of numbers: there are no distinct indicators of "high" and "low," but there are percentages that make it easy to determine, via income bracket for example, where on a range an individual falls.

DISABILITY

Disability Rights and Neurodiversity:

   Disabilities are not defects but are variations among people. While institutions can cause problems by designing services for only certain types of bodies, there is nothing inherently wrong with bodies that do not fall within that range. Much language concerning disabilities is context- and audience-dependent. In general, use language that is sensitive to the specific context and the specific audience. If in doubt, check with your professor, or choose one type of terminology and explain your reasoning in a footnote.

General guidelines:

• Use person-first language:

   Use *people with intellectual/physical/developmental disabilities* rather than *disabled people*
   (Note: some people prefer the latter, saying that their disability is important to who they are.)

• Avoid negatively-charged language:

   uses a wheelchair rather than *confined to a wheelchair*
   diagnosed with bipolar disorder rather than *suffers from bipolar disorder*
   person with a physical disability rather than *physically challenged*

• At present, the term *handicapped* is a legal term that is widely used in documents, on signs, etc. Nevertheless, some find the term to be insensitive.

• Do not use disabilities as nouns to refer to people:

> Use *people with mental illnesses* NOT *the mentally ill*

• Do not call someone '*brave*' or '*heroic*' simply for living with a disability. Don't use victimizing language such as *afflicted, restricted, stricken, suffering* and *unfortunate*.

• Avoid use the language of disability as metaphor, which unfairly stigmatizes people with disabilities, such as lame (lame idea), blind (blind luck), paralyzed (paralyzed with indecision), deaf (deaf ears), crazy, insane, moron, retarded, crippling, disabling, and the like.

• Capitalize a group name when stressing the fact that they are a cultural community (e.g. *Deaf culture*); do not capitalize when referring only to the physical disability.

• Referring to people without disabilities:

> Use *people without disabilities* (physical); *neurotypical individuals* (mental); NOT *normal, healthy*. The term *able-bodied* may be appropriate in some disciplines.

References

Ben-Moshe, Liat. "'Lame Idea': Disabling Language in the Classroom." *Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability in the University Classroom and Curriculum*. Ben-Moshe et al., eds. Syracuse: The Graduate School, Syracuse University, 2005.

Guidelines for Non-handicapping Language in APA Journals**:**

National Center on Disability and Journalism

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. 2010. Print.

Traponline's guide to Talking about Disability

We hope that this handout illustrates that the language of difference is complex and constantly evolving, and the need for all of us to be thoughtful in our selection of language. If you have suggestions for revising this handout, please contact the Writing Center.