

the **POWER *of* LANGUAGE**

AN INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE FOR EMPLOYEES



EMORY
UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

The words we use have the power to help our colleagues feel welcome and valued or to make them feel strange and unwanted. By being mindful of the language we choose, we have the power to make our teams and the workplace one where every Emory colleague thrives.

In this Inclusive Language Guide, we provide both general and community-specific examples of ways you can create a more welcoming workplace – just using language! Our goal is to invite all Emory employees to try out words and phrases to practice inclusion.

Language is
one of our
most powerful
tools for
creating an
inclusive
workplace.

INCLUSIVE APPROACHES & LANGUAGE

Curiosity and humility are the cornerstone of inclusive communication. Here are 5 strategies you can use to directly impact your interactions with others, whether one on one or in a group.



Respect and Dignity

First and foremost, treat everyone with basic respect and dignity. Instead of striving to see everyone as the same, try to notice and welcome the unique experiences we all bring to the workplace.



Open to Feedback

There isn't a single Emory employee who can say they've never made a mistake! By being open to feedback, you show your colleagues that you are interested in hearing about their experience and valuing who they are at work. In some of the community-specific examples below, you'll notice that sometimes even in a single community there are mixed opinions on what language is most respectful. Language is changing all of the time. By being open to feedback, we show others we are open to learning.



Ask if you're unsure

Ask if you're unsure. We can't know everything! If you are unsure about what the best language is to use or about how your colleague would like to be referred to, it is perfectly okay to respectfully ask. Pro-tip: Don't make it awkward in a meeting. Try speaking to a colleague one-to-one where they may feel more comfortable sharing. Be sure to share that you want to use the most respectful language and that you're asking for their help and insight on achieving that goal. Still don't feel comfortable asking? You're not alone. There are many resources online and at Emory to support you.



Avoid Assumptions

One of the biggest challenges for creating an inclusive workplace is the assumptions we each carry with us. We all have biases – whether we want to or not, and whether or not we even notice we hold them! First, try to notice when you are making an assumption. Where did that assumption come from? Did you hear it from someone else, did you learn an idea about a certain kind of person when you were young? Second, practice seeing the person in front of you instead of the assumption you hold. By avoiding or challenging our own assumptions, we create space for our colleagues to showing us who they really are – not who we expected them to be.



Validate Others

Validate others' language. Use the language that others prefer for themselves. For example, many Americans grow up hearing "African-American" as the polite term to use when discussing people of the African diaspora. Today, you'll find many colleagues at Emory have diverse opinions on the best language to use. Some prefer African-American, others prefer Black or Black-American.



DISABILITY

Say Disabled

The word disabled is an appropriate, inoffensive term. Instead of “handicap”, say “disability” and instead of “handicapped” use “disabled.” If appropriate, you may use a more specific term (e.g., physical disability, Down’s syndrome, autism). Avoid the term “differently abled.”

Avoid “Superhero” Language

Don’t refer to disabled people as “superheroes” or to a disability as a “superpower.” Many people find this patronizing and doing so may diminish the real challenges that disabled individuals face.

Neurodiverse or Neurodivergent?

Use “neurodiverse” when you are addressing a group of people. Use “neurodivergent” when referring to a single person who is not neurotypical.

Person-First or Identity-First Language?

“A person with a disability”

Person-first language is when you say “person” before describing them.

“A disabled person”

Identity-first language is when you put the descriptor in front of the person.

Different people and communities have their own preferences between person first (“a person with a disability”) or identity first (a disabled person) language. Use whatever language the person or group you are addressing prefers. If you are unsure or are speaking to a group of people, you can use person-first and identity-first language interchangeably.

GENDER

Research has shown that women are about twice as likely to be interrupted at work than men.



DONT INTERRUPT. UPLIFT WOMEN'S VOICES

Women are also shown to be seen negatively if she sticks up for herself after being interrupted. While people of any gender can interrupt someone else, we can support women colleagues by taking care not to interrupt them when speaking. We can also uplift women's contributions by stepping in when interrupting happens or returning the conversation to someone after an interruption occurs. Try these scripts: "Excuse me, Morgan - I was really interested to hear Latisha finish her thought" or "Thanks for adding that in, Jhumpa. Elaine, could you tell us more about what you were saying a moment ago?" Finally, we can use language to uplift the contributions that women make to our teams. Imagine your colleague Amara just shared an idea. When you begin to add to her idea, you might say: "I appreciate the idea that Amara introduced. I'd like to build on what she said and add..."

USE TITLES AND HONORIFICS CORRECTLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Research has shown that women who have a Doctoral degree are less likely to be referred to as doctor than men of the same title. For transgender and gender non-conforming people, we may mistakenly use the incorrect honorific and misgender someone (e.g., using Mr. when someone uses the gender-neutral honorific "Mx."). So, what can we do? It is always okay to respectfully ask someone how they would like you to refer to them. Take this script for example: "I want to make sure I use the correct language for you. Which title do you prefer?" Additionally, be sure to use titles and honorifics evenly across peers - in a single meeting, don't refer to the senior administrator as "Dr. Robinson" and the clerk as "Shirley." Instead, aim for "Dr. Robinson" and "Ms. Williams."

GENDER *(cont.)*

ENSURE YOU'RE USING THE CORRECT NAME

Our names represent who we are, and using the correct name for someone is a sign of basic respect and recognition! Many people at Emory utilize a “chosen name” in lieu of their given name. Some examples include folks who use a shortened version (Maggie instead of Margaret), people who adopt a Western/Americanized name (Deborah in place of Jing Mei), and transgender people who adopt a name that is fitting for their gender identity. Be sure that you know and use the correct name for colleagues and students.



AGE & GENERATION

Notice (and remove) sneaky ageist terms

Ageism is prejudice, discrimination, or stereotyping based on a person's age. It can affect people of all ages but most commonly targets older adults and, in some contexts, younger individuals. Language that is discriminatory on the basis of age often sneaks into our everyday conversations. For example, the phrases “We need an energetic person for this role” or “We need a seasoned professional to lead this initiative” both used coded language to communicate negative messages about age. Practice inclusion by getting curious about where ageist terms and ideas sneak into your work and try replacing them. Instead of the “energetic” example above, try focusing on the skills you're looking for: “We need someone who is innovative and has the bandwidth for this project.”

RACE & ETHNICITY

Be specific

When possible, try using language that is specific to the group you are discussing. Instead of “Asian,” you might try identifying the direct country or culture (e.g., Hmong, Filipino). A broad term isn’t incorrect, necessarily, but being specific is a step toward inclusivity.

Capitalize racial and ethnic identifiers

Racial and ethnic markers should be capitalized in writing. These include Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Asian. Nationalities should always be capitalized.

Race describes people according to physical traits that are shared by groups, while **ethnicity** describes a group of people who share common culture, language, ancestry, religion, traditions or history.



Race and ethnicity are often paired together in the U.S., but they don’t actually mean the same thing.



Practice your pronunciation

Making an effort to learn and pronounce names from different cultures correctly shows respect and inclusivity. If you’re unsure of a pronunciation, politely ask for guidance and practice until you get it right—an honest effort goes a long way.

Be cautious of outdated terms

Language around race and ethnicity evolves, and it’s important to update our vocabulary to reflect current thinking. For instance, terms like “Asian” or “Pacific Islander” are now used instead of “Oriental.” These changes show respect for diverse identities and experiences.



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



Don't assume someone's sexual orientation.

Sometimes, our words can suggest that the heterosexual experience is “normal” or even the “correct” way to be – this can ostracize LGBTQ+ people. For example, let’s say we hear a colleague mention that he is married. If we ask, “What is your wife’s name?,” we are not only assuming that our colleague is straight, but also (often unintentionally) suggesting that all people are heterosexual. One way to support inclusion at Emory is to use language that supports diverse sexual orientations. In the example about our colleague, we might use gender-neutral language instead: “I heard you mention that you are married. What is your spouse’s name?” Relatedly, avoid using stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people (e.g., they act X way, they dress Y way) to assume a colleague’s sexuality.

Avoid invalidating experiences

Like with other communities we’ve discussed in this guide, language that is painful or discriminatory about LGBTQ+ people often slips into our day-to-day vocabulary. Some examples are more obvious, like using stereotypes or derogatory language, while other instances can be more hard to identify or even challenging to explain to someone why it might be negative. Avoid phrases like: “that’s so gay,” “It’s just a phase,” or “It’s trendy to be gay these days.”

Why did we say “LGBQ” in this section instead of “LGBTQ?”

The acronym LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) is an umbrella term which includes people from gender and sexual minorities. In this section on “sexual orientation,” we used the term “LGBQ” because transgender (the T) is a gender identity, not a sexual orientation.

SPIRITUALITY & RELIGION



RECOGNIZE HOLIDAYS

On the topic of holidays and observances, some inclusive language practices have already been shared in the mainstream. For example, using the language of “Winter Recess” instead of “Christmas Break” is a growing practice at Emory. This practice recognizes that 1) other faiths observe holidays in the winter months and 2) not all faiths have winter month holidays. When talking about holidays, you can also be thoughtful about the intention of the holiday when deciding on language to use. For example, it is inappropriate to wish “Happy Yom Kippur” to a Jewish colleague as Yom Kippur is a day of atonement. This is true for holidays in some other traditions such as Ramadan (instead try: “Ramadan Mubarak”) or Ash Wednesday (instead try: “Blessed Ash Wednesday”).

RESPECT DIVERSE BELIEFS

In the U.S., we tend to center Christian experiences even without realizing that this is happening. To practice allyship, we want to continue to include Christian experiences while also actively recognizing and supporting other belief systems. Our colleagues have diverse religious and spiritual beliefs, including identifying as non-religious or secular. Using inclusive language, we can show respect for many different beliefs by 1) not assuming others’ religious affiliation or beliefs and 2) actively including diverse belief systems.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This guide was produced by Emory University Human Resources for Emory University employees. You can find additional resources on campus in many offices and departments. Here are a few places to start.

OFFICE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION | [DIVERSITY.EMORY.EDU](https://diversity.emory.edu)

The purpose of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI) is to support Emory's institutional mission "to create, teach, preserve, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity" by championing the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and human and social justice that undergirds that mission.

INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY AND COMPLIANCE | [EQUITYANDCOMPLIANCE.EMORY.EDU](https://equityandcompliance.emory.edu)

The Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (IEC) fulfills the University's commitment to equity and fair treatment of all members of our community. This Office includes the teams of: Accessibility Services, Title IX, and Equity and Civil Rights Compliance.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION EDUCATION AND OUTREACH | [HR.EMORY.EDU](https://hr.emory.edu)

Located in central HR, the DIEO team provides live and asynchronous learning opportunities focused on diversity and inclusion topics. In addition to quarterly general enrollment, they also offer department or team level trainings as well as consulting.

CENTER FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND EXCELLENCE | [CFDE.EMORY.EDU](https://cfde.emory.edu)

Within the CFDE, you'll find faculty-oriented programs which include inclusion related topics such as: inclusive pedagogy, inclusive assessments, difficult discussions, and accessible classrooms.