

REDUCING *BIAS* IN LANGUAGE

As an author of a manuscript you bring your own cultural lens, and potential biases, to your work. It is important that you be sensitive to the preferences and concerns of the people about whom you are writing. To check for bias in your language, APA suggests that you (a) substitute your own group for the group[s] you are discussing or (b) imagine that you are a member of the group you are discussing. If you feel offended, you need to revise. A number of other suggestions for reducing bias in your language are discussed in the APA manual (pp. 46-60) and are outlined below.

Describe at the appropriate level of specificity

In scientific writing, *specificity* is desired. For example, if your sample consists of 10% Cuban Americans, 15% Mexican Americans, and 20% Puerto Rican Americans, you should report this rather than the less specific "45% Hispanic Americans." Similarly, using the term *man* when referring to people in general is less specific than *men and women*.

Be sensitive to labels

- **Refer to groups with the terms that they prefer.** This may require asking members of those groups about their preferences.
- **Avoid labeling people.** It is less precise and more dehumanizing to use the term *LDs* than *students with dyslexia*.
- Bias may result when one group is promoted as the standard against which others are judged. For example, *Gay men were twice as likely as the normal population . . .*

Acknowledge participation

- Replace *subjects* with *participants*, *students*, *individuals*, or *respondents*.
- Use **active voice** - *Participants completed questionnaires* is preferable to *Subjects were given surveys*.
- Avoid the word *failed*. *Seven students did not complete the survey* is preferable to *Seven subjects failed to complete the survey*.

Racial and Ethnic Identity - Ask your participants for preferences when possible.

- Racial and ethnic groups are proper nouns and should be capitalized. ***No hyphens***.
- Be specific when possible. Naming countries of origin is preferable to more global labels (e.g., Korean, Japanese, and/or Chinese rather than Asian).
- American Indians and Native Americans are both acceptable. Black and African American are both acceptable. Asian is preferred to Oriental. White is acceptable and should be capitalized.

Gender

- Words that are gender specific (*he, policeman*) may incorrectly imply that only men are being described; sexist bias also occurs when the pronoun *he* is used to refer to both sexes..
- Options for the use of the generic *he* include
 - ▶ **rephrasing** (e.g., When a student reads a book he tries to . . . /When one reads a book one tries to . . .);
 - ▶ the **use plural nouns or pronouns** (e.g., When students read books, they try to . . .); and
 - ▶ **replacing the pronoun with an article** (e.g., When reading *his* book, he . . . /When reading *the* book, the student . . .).

Replacing *he* with *he* and *she*, *he/she*, or *s/he* is cumbersome and should be done sparingly.

Sexual Orientation

- *Sexual orientation* is currently preferred to *sexual preference*.
- *Lesbians* and *gay men* are preferred to *homosexuals* when referring to specific groups.
- Include gender if it is not clear from the context (e.g., *gay men* rather than simply *gay*).
- Sexual behavior should be distinguished from sexual orientation; some men and women engage in sexual activities with others of their own sex but do not consider themselves to be gay or lesbian.
- Adjectives are preferred to nouns (*same-gender, male-male, female-female, and male-female sexual behavior*).

Disabilities - The guiding principle for “nonhandicapping” language is to maintain the integrity of individuals as human beings.

- Avoid language that **equates people with their conditions** (e.g., *neurotics, the disabled, paraplegics*); that has **superfluous, negative overtones** (e.g., *stroke victim*); or that is regarded as a **slur** (e.g., *cripple*).
- Use *disability* to refer to an attribute of a person - *handicap* refers to the source of the limitations.
- Challenged and *special* are often considered euphemistic and should only be used if participants in your study prefer those terms.

Age

- Age should be defined in the description of participants in the Methods section when describing the sample.
- Age ranges should be as specific as possible (e.g., *12-18* rather than *under 18*).
- *Boy* and *girl* should be used for people of high school age and younger.
- *Young man, young woman, male adolescent, and female adolescent* are acceptable when appropriate.
- *Men* and *women* should be used for people over 18 (or of college age and older).
- *Elderly* is not acceptable. *Older person* is preferred.

CHECK YOURSELF

The following passage contains a number of examples of language usage that are potentially biased. Find and correct them.

In this study we examined whether there were differences in the participation rates of white students and minority students in college science classes. In addition, we wanted to determine whether students who had been identified as having a learning disability differed from students with no identifiable learning disability. The subjects in the study consisted of 247 white students (120 men and 127 girls) and 250 minority students (125 men, 125 girls). The minority group included Hispanics, Orientals, and African-American students. Subjects were given surveys that included questions about how often they participated in class discussions. In each group, approximately 20% of the students had been identifies as Learning Disabled (LD). Fifteen subjects (7 white, 8 minority) failed to fill out their surveys correctly and were therefore not included in subsequent analyses.

The results of the study indicated white and minority students did not differ in their rate of participation in science classes. However, there were differences in the observed consequences of participation by group. For the white group, participation was not associated with higher grades. When a minority student participated actively in class, his grade was higher. In addition, results indicated that LD students participated less frequently in class discussions than normal students, but when the LDs did participate their grades were higher. The results of this study should be of interest to department chairmen.