Illinois Valley Community College [Guide to Writing in Formal Voice](http://www2.ivcc.edu/rambo/tip_formal_writing_voice.htm) (excerpt)

4. Avoid colloquialism and slang expressions.

Colloquial diction is informal language used in everyday speech and includes such words as "guys," "yeah," "stuff," "kind of," "okay," and "big deal." Highly informal diction, such as "freak out" and "dissing," falls into the category of "slang." While slang words often are vivid and expressive, slang comes and goes quickly, another reason why slang should be avoided in formal writing. Both colloquialism and slang expressions convey an informal tone and should be avoided in formal writing.

Example
*The guy was nailed for ripping off a liquor store.*The man was convicted of robbing a liquor store.

As you avoid informal language, be careful not to use words that suggests ideas that you may not intend. "The gentleman was convicted of robbing a liquor store" would probably leave readers wondering why the man who robbed the store is considered to be a "gentleman." Likewise, "the lady was convicted of robbing a liquor store" would probably cause readers to wonder why a woman who robs a liquor store is considered to be a "lady."

### 5. Avoid nonstandard diction.

Nonstandard diction refers to expressions that are not considered legitimate words according to the rules of Standard English usage. Nonstandard diction includes "ain't," "theirselves," "hisself," "anyways," "alot" (the accepted version is "a lot"), and "alright" (the accepted version is "all right"). Most good dictionaries will identify such expressions with the word "Nonstandard." Because nonstandard expressions generally are not regarded as legitimate words, I mark these expressions in essays as examples of "inaccurate word choice."

### 6. Avoid abbreviated versions of words.

For example, instead of writing "photo," "phone" and "TV," write "photograph," "telephone," and "television."

Pearson Publishers [Guide to Avoiding Sexist (and other Insensitive Language](http://wps.pearsoncustom.com/pls_1256647969_pwo/217/55693/14257494.cw/index.html) (excerpt)

Most writers want to be respectful of others by avoiding offensive—particularly sexist—language. The question, “what counts as sexist?” is the blunt query that seems to call for a list of words to avoid. Yes, such a list could be made: swear words that emphasize masculine power or feminine helplessness would top this list, and "pet terms" that imply that a person is inexperienced or less capable (for example, "girlie" or "son") would be featured as well.

But that offensive words list would not cover the range of adjustments people need to make to their regular use of English in order to blunt its bias toward "male." To put it directly, the English language prefers the male. Social conventions commonly refer to all people "mankind" or "man" and use "he" as the generic pronoun. Being inclusive of all people requires some structural adjustments to expression. For example, while the address "Mr." is seen as a neutral way to refer to any man, there is no neutral way to refer to a woman—is she naturally a "Miss," a "Mrs.," or a "Ms."?

Below, we discuss offensive and gender-sensitive language in more detail as a way to provide you with some guidelines for becoming more sensitive to potentially offensive expression. As stated earlier, paying attention to your language in this area is ethical behavior. But, it is also polite, respectful, and wise: You always want to treat fellow workers in the ways that you would want to be treated.

## Offensive Language

Language can be offensive either through intent or interpretation. Because it is communication, there will be specific, possibly different meanings for the speaker/writer and also for the hearers/listeners. Further, written language is particularly dangerous because it often outlasts its writers and because it can make its way into unintended places. Take the example of an e-mail you send to a colleague that includes a mild gripe about the boss but is labeled "New Time for Meeting on Part-time Budget Requests." That e-mail is likely to get forwarded to the boss and others, and your mild gripe may well offend the boss (in part because many people see it).

Random House Webster’s College Dictionary has made available information how they assign their “O.Q.” or [offensiveness quotient](http://www.randomhouse.com/words/language/oq_chart.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) for sexist and racist language. They label terms on two six-point scales—disparagement (degree of intent to offend) and offensiveness (degree of offense taken). A disparaging term can range from "not intended to offend, even though it may" (e.g., oriental, welsh [on a deal], lady, crippled) to "intended to offend and hurt" (e.g., faggot, nigger, ofay). An offensive term can range from "rarely taken as offensive" (e.g. guys [for women], Moslem [for Muslim], cover girl) to "taken as offensive and hurtful" (e.g. cunt, Hebe, gook, retard). A word’s O.Q. is the average of its rank on the two scales.

To check how offensive a term may be, examine the ways that you characterize others in your writing and ask yourself

* Do I intend to insult anyone?
* Can I think of anyone who would be offended by this portrayal?

If people have told you that you sometimes offend them, it may help you to role play as one of those easily offended people. Would this easily offended person consider the term you are using as offensive to readers?

## Gender-Insensitive Language

Such reflection will help you spot overtly offensive terms in your language. But that approach of examining terms that characterize others does not cover the less direct use of language to deflate one gender— usage most label "gender-insensitive" language. Most writers need the work, becoming gender sensitive because there are no clear guidelines.

We suggest that you focus as you inspect gender sensitivity in language on references to persons. Notice how particular people are referred to; notice how general nouns are phrased; notice how pronouns are used.

#### Proper Nouns

The patterns of reference to people should be similar in your texts. If you talk about four people in a text, you should refer to them in analogous ways:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **First Reference** | **Second Reference** | **Pronouns** |
| Stanley Jones | Jones | he |
| Chris Solomon | Solomon | depends on sex |
| Jane Jackson | Jackson | she |
| Marvin Barnes | Barnes | he |

If the last name alone is used in second and subsequent references, all people should receive the same treatment.

But, if at least some of the people hold a high rank, and therefore you want to include their titles with their names, all people referenced in the document should nevertheless receive the same treatment.

#### ****General Nouns****

When you use general or collective nouns to reference people, you should be sensitive to the use of "man" to represent all people.

For example:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Insensitive to Gender** | **Sensitive to Gender** |
| man | humankind or people |
| chairman | chairperson or chair |
| policeman | police officer |
| sportsman | sports person |
| cattleman | cattle rancher |
| cowboy | cowhand |
| workman | worker |
| newspaperman | journalist |
| businessman | business person or professional |
| foreman | shift boss |
| congressman | congress person |
| salesman | salesperson |
| craftsman | craftperson |
| clergyman | clergyperson or clergy |
| fisherman | crew member or fishes folk |
| clansman | clan member |
| ombudsman | consumer advocate |
| spokesman | spokes person; representative for |
| cameraman | camera person or camera operator |

Interestingly, some of the words dubbed insensitive to gender have more sensitive counterparts that sound "right" to us, while others do not. "Sports Person of the Year" and "congress person" sound more off putting than "chair" or "police officer."

#### ****Pronouns****

When you refer to a human in general, avoid using "he" exclusively. There are two ways frequently used to do this: (1) Pluralize references to people (instead of "he" you use "they") or (2) Alternate the use of "he" and "she". As the second alternative is sometimes seen as "politically correct," it might be wise to begin making general references in the plural.

## Disability-Insensitive Language

You may also find it difficult to refer to disabilities. The American Psychological Association offers particularly helpful guidelines for identifying how references to a person’s disability might be seen as insensitive. The APA recommends that "disability" be used to refer to an attribute of a person rather than as the identifying characteristic of that person. Often, they point out, the environment is what limits a person with a disability—a building that has no ramps, for example, where people in wheelchairs cannot enter. Prejudice, too, limits what people with disabilities can achieve, if they receive fewer opportunities because they are "crippled" or "blind" or "deaf".

A guiding principle, therefore, for maintaining the integrity of people who have disabilities, is to avoid language that

* implies the whole person is disabled
* equates the person with the disability
* has negative overtones
* is seen as a slur

Put more positively, your language should:

* Put people first, not their disabilities

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Common, but insensitive** | **Better** |
| disabled person | person with disabilities |
| mentally ill person | person with mental illness |
| handicapped person | person with physical handicaps |

* Avoid disability labels that cover the person, particularly offensive ones

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Common, but insensitive** | **Better** |
| schizophrenic | person with schizophrenia |
| amputee | person with an amputation |
| disabled | person with disabilities |
| learning disabled | person with learning disabilities |
| cripple | person with a limp |
| mongoloid | person with Down’s Syndrome |
| crazy | person with symptoms of mental illness |

* Use emotionally neutral statements

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Common, but insensitive** | **Better** |
| stroke victim | individual who has had a stroke |
| suffering from multiple sclerosis | person who has multiple sclerosis |
| family burden | with family support needs |

**The University of Leicester** [**Guide to Inclusive Writing**](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/inclusive)

People do not want to feel excluded, or to be labelled inferior, either as individuals, or as members of a group. However, it is possible to exclude or imply inferiority without realising it, if insufficient care is taken with your writing. This Study Guide reviews the main ways in which inappropriate assumptions can be made within academic writing, and gives ideas about how to avoid this within your own writing.

There are many words that have been widely used traditionally, but which are based on outdated assumptions. A familiar example is words containing the word man e.g.: chairman, manpower, and man-made, the use of which can be taken to imply that women do not participate in these activities.

We also have a tradition of referring to people with disabilities, by their disability e.g.: calling a person with epilepsy ‘an epileptic’; and of using stereotypes with unhelpful presumptions of ‘normality’ and by implication ‘abnormality’. These problems are most commonly found within the fields of: **gender**; **disability**; **race**; and **sexual orientation**. Language with regard to these characteristics will be examined in turn within this Study Guide.

**The challenge**

The appropriateness of language is a contested area that changes in the light of social debates and political agendas. It is not possible to prescribe appropriate language in all cases. The challenge is:

*“…to communicate in a manner that does not exclude particular individuals or groups. At the same time … to avoid getting trapped in euphemisms and the ever-changing preferences of various “politically correct” factions—both liberal and conservative. It’s a balancing act, the basic premise of which is to treat people as individuals who are equal.”*

[**http://ucommunications.colorado.edu/services/style-guide/inclusive-writing**](http://ucommunications.colorado.edu/services/style-guide/inclusive-writing)

**Examples and references**

This Study Guide uses examples taken from the following websites and book, which are all recommended references:

* American Psychological Association at  **<http://www.apastyle.org/manual/related/guidelines-reporting-and-writing.pdf>**
* British Sociological Association at [**www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/**](http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/)
* The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at  **[www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/gender.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/gender.html)**
* Brookes, I. & Marshall, D. (2004) Good writing guide. Edinburgh: Chambers.

**Examples of writing that is not inclusive**

*“If we get an engineering student on the committee we’ll need to make sure that he can fit the meetings in around his project work”*
This assumes that all engineering students are male.

*“We need to cater for the wives as well as the managers”*This implies firstly that all managers must be male; and secondly that they will have female partners.

*“The professors may need a little extra time in case they forget where they’ve parked”*
This implies all professors are absent-minded and forgetful.

Such writing can make people feel:

* less important than others
* defective
* irritated  that they have fewer rights
* inappropriately stereotyped
* excluded
* offended
* unvalued
* abnormal
* biased against

**Particular challenges within academic writing**

If you are writing about, or conducting, research involving human participants, it may be essential that you report certain demographic details such as gender, race, ethnicity, and age. These details may be needed to inform the interpretation of the findings, and to support judgements about their generalisability. Such details may need to appear in any section of a piece of writing, from the literature review, through the method and findings sections, to the conclusions. The key questions to address are:

* **when** should we report these details?
* **how** should we refer to special interest groups?

Guiding principles are that:

* you need to record and describe the demographic details that are **relevant** to the conduct, findings, and generalisability of the research, but not the demographic details that are not;
* you need to take care that the descriptions you use would not offend people in the groups you are describing. Ideally you would use terms that people in those groups might use to describe themselves.

It is important to appreciate that what may sometimes seem to be a very minor difference in the label chosen can make a huge difference to the impact that label has on members of that group.

**General principles you can use to guide your writing**

In addition to the guidance and examples given later, about specific areas where care needs to be taken, the following are some general principles that are useful to work to in all writing.

1. Avoid implying that people in a certain group are abnormal compared with the normal population e.g.: when comparing people with a disability with people who do not have that particular disability, use the term ‘non-disabled’ or ‘people without a disability’ rather than the word ‘normal’.
2. Take care not to appear to use your own group as the reference group, thus implying both normality and superiority e.g.: describing a culture as ‘culturally deprived’ implies that it fails in comparison with, usually, western culture.
3. Keep in mind that differences arising from race or ethnic comparisons do not imply deficits.
4. Try to become routinely aware of any assumptions you are making regarding gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, or any other pattern or grouping.
5. Become familiar with websites, books, or articles, that give good guidance on this issue, such as those listed on the first page.

**Gender**

An ever-present problem is how to avoid the potentially distracting over-use of  ‘he or she’ or ‘s/he’ scattered throughout a piece of writing, yet retain an essence of neutrality. Table 1 shows some ideas to help with this.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Priniciple** | **Example** | **Suggested alternative** |
| Use ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’ (only when the use of plurals would be acceptable) | “Each respondent was asked whether he wished to participate.” | “Respondents were asked whether they wished to participate.” |
| Use ‘you’ to speak direct to the reader | “The student should make sure she checks her references carefully.” | “You should make sure you check your references carefully.” |
| Changing the sentence to avoid the need to state a gender | “The child should be given ample time to familiarise himself with the test material.” | “Ample time should be allowed for the child to become familiar with the test material.” |

Table 1: Gendered language

Another possibility is to alternate genders throughout a list, or by chapter. As well as being explicit in pronouns such as he, she, him, and her, gender is implicit in many nouns themselves. Table 2 lists examples of the kind of word to look out for, and offers some corresponding gender-neutral options.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Gendered noun** | **Gender-neutral noun** |
| man in the street | people in general, people |
| manpower | workforce, labour force, employees |
| cameraman | camera operator |
| policeman | police officer |
| forefathers | ancestors |
| founding fathers | founders |
| old masters | classic art/artists |
| master copy | top copy/original |
| steward, stewardess | flight attendant |
| man-made | artificial, synthetic |

Table 2: Gendered nouns

**Disability**

People with a disability usually prefer to be thought of first as individual people. They prefer not to be labelled primarily as victims; passively disabled; or labelled constantly with the name of their disability. The aim is to maintain the integrity of individuals e.g.:

* The term ‘disabled person’ implies that a person as a whole is disabled. It could be replaced with ‘person with (who has) a disability’.
* The term ‘epileptic’ equates the person with their condition. Instead you could write ‘person with epilepsy’.
* The term ‘stroke victim’ has superfluous, negative overtones of passivity and victim-hood. It would be preferable to write ‘individual who had had a stroke’.
* Similarly, the term ‘confined to a wheelchair’ could more respectfully be replaced by ’person who uses a wheelchair’, changing from passive to active voice.

All of these suggestions put the individual person first, and refer to their disability second.

**Race**

It is important to report details of race and ethnicity where they are necessary to describe or explain an aspect of method, analysis, or interpretation. Where this is essential, it is important to use acceptable labels. You need to be guided in acceptability by members of the groups you are describing, rather than by any standard practice you might be used to. Names and preferences change over time so it is important to check what is currently acceptable.

General guidance can be given, but this is, along with the rest of the guidance in this Study Guide, best practice only at the time of writing (2007), and will need to be checked for current validity at the time of use. Current advice is to:

* use positive descriptions/definitions such as *Asian*, which give people a name in their own right, rather than negative ones like *Non-White*, that define people relative to a supposed norm of ‘whiteness’;
* avoid saying English if you mean *British*: this could alienate some people you are including who are Scottish or Welsh rather than English;
* avoid hyphens in multiword labels e.g.: *Mexican Americans* is preferable to *Mexican-Americans*. The first is a description of some Americans, with the additional information in the adjective ‘Mexican’, while the second is a label or name;
* be aware of assumptions implicit in commonly used words and phrases such as: *illegal asylum seekers*, when to seek asylum is not in itself illegal; and the term *assimilation*, if you are really talking about *integration*;
* be aware that *ethnic minorities* is not necessarily the same as *Non-White* e.g.: the ethnic minority might be Irish or Welsh;
* When possible, authors should use the more specific rather than the less specific term (e.g., *Choctaws* is more specific than *American Indian*; *Cubans* is more specific than *Hispanic*).

**Sexual orientation**

You need to acknowledge the existence of a range of sexual orientations. Careless wording can easily make people feel excluded, or abnormal. The table below gives some examples of careless writing, explains what the problem is, and suggests more acceptable wording.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Problematic** | **Preferred** | **Comment** |
| Sexual preference | Sexual orientation | Using ‘orientation’ avoids the connotation of voluntary choice, and thereby potential blame, implicit in the word ‘preference’. |
| Women's sexual partners should use condoms. | Women's male sexual partners should use condoms. | Avoids assumption of heterosexuality. |
| AIDS education must extend beyond the gay male population to the general population. | AIDS education must not focus only on selected groups. | Does not imply that gay men are set apart from the general population. |

**The Hijacking of Political Correctness**

by [Allan G. Johnson](http://agjohnson.wordpress.com/author/agjohnson/) on Friday, January 3, 2014

I must admit to being impressed by how effectively words that focus on privilege and oppression have been distorted, trashed, and hijacked. It’s gotten so bad that even Susan Sarandon won’t call herself a feminist anymore.

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Privilege is not for nothing. Having power means getting to decide what’s broadcast and put into print, what’s news and what’s not, what’s taught in classrooms or debated in public, whether to admire or ridicule. It takes a toll.

What happened to the idea of being ‘politically correct’ is a case in point, although more complicated than your typical hijacking. The reason is not just how it’s been turned into an insult, but what happened to the meaning of ‘political’ along the way.

Politics has to do with collective power in social systems, how it gets distributed and used in everything from families to whole societies, including systems of privilege that could not exist without the use of power.

When I started learning about patriarchy and male privilege in the radical 70’s, the idea of political correctness was a simple combination of politics and getting it right. On the one hand, every culture has ideals and principles about the uses of power, such as democracy and equality. On the other hand there is what actually happens in a system—whether people are treated as equals, for example, and does everyone have a say.

It is politically correct when principle and practice are consistent, and incorrect when they’re not. To be politically correct is to act in ways that are ‘correct’ by a set of beliefs and values about power. It is, in short, to walk the talk.

I first heard the term used by people working for radical social change. It was a way to keep themselves in line with their beliefs and vision as they tried to overcome sometimes violent opposition to a new way of life. That’s a hard thing to do day after day—questioning things you once took for granted while being attacked from all sides. You need a set of principles to steer by.

If the goal, for example, is to end patriarchy and male privilege, and since men belong to the privileged gender that oppresses and does violence to women, is it ‘correct’ for women to sleep with men, to marry and have children with them? In other words, is that choice consistent with ending male privilege and the oppression of women?

Or, given how women are kept down by making them seem inferior, weak, and less than men, is it politically correct to refer to them as ‘girls’? Or for women to allow men to rush ahead and open doors for them when they are perfectly capable of doing it themselves?

These may seem like trivial questions, but they are not, which can be seen in how annoyed men can get when you bring them up. To demand that women not be called girls, for example, both holds men to account for what they say and alerts women to how they may participate in their own oppression. It also confronts the idea that women are children in need of male protection and the control that goes with it. The same can be said of men opening doors for women, no matter how innocent the intent. And suggesting that women refuse to sleep or partner with men challenges the idea of women as sexual property, which has long been a linchpin of male privilege.

Political correctness is always an issue when it comes to inequality and power, as when members of a white fraternity put on blackface and hold a mock slave auction as a form of entertainment, or people routinely use words like ‘faggot’ and ‘queer’ as terms of insult. Are such patterns consistent with mainstream ideals of equality, justice, fairness, and human dignity, by which power—including the power of culture in the form of speech—should not be used by one group to oppress another?

When the women’s and civil rights movements started asking such questions in public, many men and whites felt vulnerable and held to account in ways they didn’t like. And so they counterattacked with a shift of attention away from issues of power and privilege and onto women and people of color by accusing them of taking out their personal problems on innocent men and whites. Women in particular were told they were too sensitive, wanting to be men, anti-sex, prudish, trying to enforce their own arbitrary rules of polite and proper behavior.

*The goal of such attacks was to separate behavior and speech from their political consequences*, so that objections to everyday acts that enforce privilege and oppression would be seen as nothing more than a trivial protest over etiquette and hurt feelings.

And it worked.

The hijacking of political correctness made a powerful tool in the struggle for social justice look like petty impositions on freedom of speech, requiring members of dominant groups to be ‘sensitive’ and ‘nice’ and cautious to a fault about what they say and do, whether it’s men touching women they hardly know or calling them ‘honey’ or white people using expressions such as ‘Oriental’ or ‘colored’ or naming their football team the Redskins.

It has been a victory of form over substance. We can talk all we want about who was offended or got their feelings hurt because so-and-so said such-and-such about one of ‘those people,’ so long as we do not talk about what is going on underneath.

We can hash over the Washington Redskins’ choice of a name so long as we are silent about real life among Native American peoples and the ongoing destruction of indigenous cultures.

We can argue about whether women are ‘girls’ or ‘ladies’ so long as we do not talk about how progress toward gender equity has been stalled for more than twenty years, or about the unnamed epidemic of men’s violence not only against women but everyone else.

Or we can express outrage when Don Imus calls young black women ‘nappy-headed hos,’ so long as we are silent on the continuing history of racist degradation of black women’s bodies and sexuality and all the other forms of their singular oppression.

The hijacking of political correctness has helped remove the reality of privilege and oppression from public conversation and replaced it with a running battle of competing complaints about offensive acts on the one hand and the policing of personal behavior on the other.

And now ‘feminism.’ Not to mention ‘socialism’ or any other alternative to unbridled capitalism. And ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ are not far behind as corporations and the wealthy show the rest of us what raw power can do.

What is at stake in this struggle is not only words, but the ideas we live by. And to see how it matters, this selective destruction of words and the ideas they name, we need only look at where we’ve come and where we are going. This is how it is done.

[***http://agjohnson.wordpress.com/2014/01/03/the-hijacking-of-political-correctness/***](http://agjohnson.wordpress.com/2014/01/03/the-hijacking-of-political-correctness/)