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USING EQUITABLE LANGUAGE

Language is powerful. It's how we tell our own stories and learn about others' lives. It's how we connect, inspire and build bridges. At the University of Washington, we're devoted to broadening horizons, learning and teaching about the vast array of cultures in the world, and making connections among the diversity of people's experiences and wisdom.

We reach those goals with **inclusive language**: communication that respects and reflects people's lived experience, **using the words they find most accurate and centering their point of view**. Inclusive language helps us understand and be understood; it shows that we're listening and that we care; **it helps us build trust with our readers.**

Language evolves along with culture. It will never be possible to list all the "right" ways of using language for diversity, inclusivity and equity, because language and culture are fluid. As communicators, **we have a responsibility to stay current** on the language of identity and inclusion. Using a term that might once have been the norm but is now out of use can come across as insulting or disrespectful; even if you didn't intend to cause hurt, **it's the impact that matters**. **Continuing to learn and observe** how people and groups describe themselves will help you be as accurate and culturally aware as possible, forging connections and understanding rather than reinforcing power imbalances.

Equitable language means not only using (and avoiding) particular words but paying attention to **whom you write about**, **how you tell their stories**, **whose points of view are included and whose are absent** — whose voices are amplified and whose perspective is assumed. **Representation matters** in the words you use and the stories you tell. Ask yourself:

- **Whose point of view is central to the story?** If the story focuses on a particular group or culture, are people from within that group the main figures, rather than an outsider coming in as the "hero"?
- **Who is left out of the story?**
- **Does the work rely on unexamined stereotypes?**
- **As the storyteller, what's your position and relationship to the subject(s)?**
- **What does the story assume about the reader?** (For instance, does it assume that the reader is or isn't part of the group being described?)

Please consult the resources below, and always listen to how people and groups want to be named and represented. **Trust that each group is the expert on their own experience.** And if you find you've made a mistake, remember that everyone makes mistakes sometimes; you can show that you care about getting it right by owning up to the mistake, apologizing, and working to do the research and improve next time. Learning is a lifelong journey.

General resources on inclusive language (see sections below for more specific resources):
Conscious Style Guide *(resources across many areas of equity and the representation of marginalized groups)*
Diversity Style Guide

RACE, ETHNICITY, NATIONALITY & RELIGION

As with all writing, in writing about race, ethnicity, nationality or religion it's important to notice and interrupt your own assumptions. **Ask your subject how they prefer to identify themselves.** Be aware of complexities and nuance; for instance, many nationalities include multiple ethnicities, and a person may be multiracial and/or multiethnic. **Learn and help educate your readers.** (Ex.: Not all from the Middle East are Arabs or Muslim. Residents of Hong Kong may not see the region as part of China.) Avoid treating cultural customs or ways of life as "exotic" or different. (They're different only to an outsider's POV.)

> *Use racial and ethnic identification when it is pertinent to a story, fairly (across all racial categories, including identifying persons as "white") and appropriately (without relying on stereotypes).*
> — Race Forward's Race Reporting Guide

> *Avoid using words, images, or situations that reinforce racial, ethnic, or religious stereotypes (even stereotypes that may appear to be positive). Avoid the term non-white, or other terms that treat whiteness as a default.*
> — 18F Content Guide

• In identifying race or ethnicity, opt for **adjectives over nouns**: "A Hispanic person" rather than "A Hispanic."

• While AP has not adopted "**Latinx**" at this point, use if it's a person's preferred descriptor.

• Do not hyphenate **compound nationalities** like "African American," "Asian American," etc. (See "Drop the Hyphen" piece below.)

• Be aware of and avoid **coded imagery and stereotypes** that implicitly suggest and/or demonize racial groups. (For instance, the use of words like "urban," "thug," "savage," etc.)

• We recommend capitalizing "**Black**" in discussing the culture or race, while leaving "white" lowercase, as it doesn't describe a particular culture. (See "Capital-B 'Black' Becomes Standard Usage" piece below.)

• Use "**white**" rather than "Caucasian."

• Avoid using "**diverse**" as a synonym for "nonwhite"; it means "containing a variety of unlike qualities." A group can be diverse; an individual can't.

CITIZENSHIP

Avoid using "citizens" to describe residents of the U.S., Washington state or any other state, unless citizenship is the specific focus. Those who are not legally citizens may be "immigrants" or, if it's relevant to the written piece, "undocumented" (not "illegal" or "alien"). Use "refugee" if that's relevant to the story (e.g., if it focuses on someone having fled violence in their home country). Avoid "Americans" unless you specifically mean those with American citizenship; "U.S residents" may be more accurate. Note that "American" is also used to mean "Latin American" or to refer to "the Americas"; again, "U.S." is more accurate when referring to this country.

RACISM

Do not use "racially charged," "racially divisive," "racially tinged" or similar terms as euphemisms for "racist" or "racism" when the latter terms are truly applicable.
— AP on race-related coverage

Terms like "racially tinged" and "racially charged" are usually euphemisms. They suggest that race can possess both positive and negative valences. This masks that, as history tells us, phrases described as "racially tinged" always involve assertions of race hierarchy, power, and privilege.
— Lawrence B. Glickman in The Boston Review

It's appropriate to name something as racist when it objectively is racist. Example of accurate and appropriate use of "racist" rather than a euphemism like "racially tinged":
"In the first half of the 20th century, African Americans and Native Americans were often prevented from voting by the racist use of poll taxes and literacy tests at the polls."

Resources for inclusive language about race, ethnicity, nationality and religion:
Race Forward's Race Reporting Guide
Racial Equity Tools Glossary (collection of definitions for words/phrases around racial equity work)
National Association of Black Journalists style guide
Guide to Covering Asian America (Asian American Journalists Association)
When to use "Hispanic" vs. "Latino"
"Drop the Hyphen in Asian American" (essay that influenced AP's decision to drop the hyphen in compound nationalities)
Capital-B 'Black' Becomes Standard Usage at The Seattle Times
"Understanding the Difference Between Race and Ethnicity" (Nadra Kareem Nittle, ThoughtCo.)
"What Does 'American' Actually Mean?" (Karina Martinez-Carter, The Atlantic)
"Unpacking the White Savior Complex" (Tola Folarin-Coker, Affinity Magazine)

NATIVE/INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

Ask the subject how they prefer to be identified. For instance, some from Indigenous groups prefer "Indian" or "American Indian" while others prefer "Native" or "Native American." Others may prefer to use only their specific tribal/nation identity ("Puyallup"). In some contexts it's important to name "Native Alaskan" as a separate identity. And, of course, people from Indigenous groups outside the U.S. may use different terms — in Canada, "First Nations" is commonly used.

• Use the person's specific affiliation, not a catch-all like "Native group" or "Indian tribe": "member of the Duwamish Tribe."

• Capitalize "Native" and "Indigenous" when they refer to a specific person or group's identity (but leave lowercase in other and more generic uses, like "she is native to the region" or "indigenous plants").

• In general writing that's *not* focused on Native experiences, avoid using metaphors like "tribe," "totem pole," "spirit animal"; these have specific significance to Indigenous groups and should not be used casually to describe non-Native experience.

Resources for inclusive language about Native and Indigenous identity:
Reporting and Indigenous Terminology (Native American Journalists Association)
"When Reporting on Indian Country, Remember These Tips" (International Journalists' Network)
Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines (University of British Columbia — especially for writing about the indigenous peoples of Canada)
Canadian Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities

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GENGER

First, it's important to understand the difference between sex and gender: **Sex** is the set of biological markers present at birth, including genitals, reproductive organs and chromosomes. **Gender** is the cultural expression of being masculine, feminine, or any combination or absence of those concepts. (Note that neither sex nor gender is an indicator of sexual orientation.)

Always respect a person's gender identity as they report it. It might not be relevant to the story, just as with any other nonrelevant trait like eye color or religion. If it is relevant to the story, be sure to ask the subject rather than making assumptions. If the person is transgender, be consistent in identifying them with the name, gender and pronouns they prefer. Do not use a "deadname" — any birthname or other prior name that a transgender person no longer uses — unless the subject gives explicit permission to use it and there's a good reason to do so.

PRONOUNS: Ask and use the subject's preferred pronouns. If they prefer "they/them," it's OK to include a brief parenthetical in a story if needed for clarity: *Jones, who uses the gender-neutral pronouns "they" and "them," expects to graduate next year.* Or: *Jones (they/them) expects to graduate next year.*

• Singular "they": If you're writing about a hypothetical person or one whose gender you don't know, it's fine to use "they" and "them" (Ex.: *If a student arrives late, they may need to find a space in the back of the room.* Or: *One professor objected, but they were overruled.*) AP and most other modern style guides and dictionaries endorse this usage.

• Avoid using "he" or "him" as a universal pronoun that includes people of any gender. Use "they" and "them," or alternate between male and female pronouns.

• In identifying a person's gender identity, when in doubt, opt for adjectives over nouns: "a transgender man," "a cisgender woman," "identifies as gender-fluid," etc.

• Avoid language that assumes the *reader's* gender perspective. When possible, opt for gender-neutral language and avoid irrelevant descriptions of appearance.

• Avoid using "the opposite sex," which ignores the reality of a gender spectrum and range of gender experiences. In places, "of a different gender" can be used instead.

• Avoid "guys" to refer to a mixed-gender group of people.

• Avoid assumptions about gender within relationship roles: "Partner" and "spouse" are more inclusive than "husband/wife," and "parents" more inclusive than "mother/father." Remember that biological roles do not necessarily indicate gender experience (Ex.: "pregnant person" is more inclusive than "pregnant woman" or "mother").

Resources for inclusive language about gender:
Writing About Transgender People and Issues (National Center for Transgender Equality)
Statement on Gender and Language (National Council of Teachers of English)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

"Sexual orientation" refers to which genders a person is physically, emotionally or romantically attracted to. In many cases, sexual orientation is not relevant to the story. If it is relevant, ask the person how they want to be identified, and confirm their permission to identify their orientation; **don't "out" someone without their explicit permission**.

• In general, opt for adjectives over nouns ("is bisexual" over "a bisexual").

• Avoid using the term "sexual preference," which suggests that orientation is a choice or otherwise not inherent.

• **Inclusive acronyms** for the range of sexual orientations include **LGBTQ+** and **LGBTQIA+**. It's OK to use either; in quotes and organization names, keep usage accurate to the source.

• "**Queer**" was historically used as a slur and is being reclaimed from within the LGBTQ+ community. It's fine to use by request, if that's how a person or organization prefers to be identified. Be cautious in using it as a general descriptor, because it can still carry offensive connotations out of context or from outside the community it's describing.

Resources for inclusive language about sexual orientation:
Association of LGBTQ Journalists style guide
GLAAD Media Reference Guide

DISABILITY

Every person is a whole person — no matter how they interact with the world.
— F18 style guide

Disability is not always obvious or visible — and a person's disability is not always relevant to a story. If it is relevant, be as specific as possible and focus on the facts; avoid using language that judges or pities a person's experience. (Ex.: "has muscular dystrophy," not "suffers from" or "is afflicted with." "Uses a wheelchair" rather than "is confined to a wheelchair" — wheelchairs provide mobility and autonomy, not confinement.)

Many people prefer "person-first" language: "has epilepsy" rather than "is an epileptic." But, as with most inclusive language, it's best to ask the person if possible. Some people find "condition-first" language more accurate to their experience. When in doubt, however, opt for person-first.

When possible, avoid metaphors of disability as a shortcoming — "fell on deaf ears," "lame," "blind to the truth," etc. Many in the disability community find metaphors of mental illness to be stigmatizing — terms like "crazy" and "insane" in casual use; consider finding other descriptors instead.

Resources for inclusive language about disability:
Disability Language Style Guide (National Center on Disability and Journalism)
Disability Writing & Journalism Guidelines (Center for Disability Rights)
Guidelines: How to Write and Report About People with Disabilities (Research & Training Center on Independent Living)

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