

Bias-Free Language Guidelines in APA 7



The APA 7th Edition recommends that authors use affirming and inclusive language. APA guidelines are just that – guidelines, not rigid rules – because language changes over time. Similarly to how we can proofread for spelling and grammar, we can reread our work to make sure we're not perpetuating prejudicial beliefs or demeaning attitudes about groups of people.

The [APA 7 Bias-Free Language guidelines are available online](#), including [General Principles for Reducing Bias](#), and guidelines for discussing [Age](#), [Disability](#), [Gender](#), [Racial and Ethnic Identity](#), [Sexual Orientation](#), and [Socioeconomic Status](#). This handout is a basic overview of these guides (APA 7, Chapter 5).

Be Appropriately Specific

By being specific you can make your writing more accurate and avoid making generalizations.

- Focus on only relevant characteristics, yet acknowledge relevant differences that do exist.
- Be appropriately specific when writing about age, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation, racial or ethnic identity, or nation/region of origin, socioeconomic status, etc.
 - **Not specific**→ The majority of the participants were **young adults**.
 - **Specific**→ The majority of the participants were **18–27 years old**.
 - **Not specific**→ Research has shown that **low-income** families are more likely to live in areas with unhealthy air quality.
 - **Specific**→ Research has shown that families **whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold for a family of [insert number]** are more likely to live in areas with unhealthy air quality.

Be Sensitive to Labels

Respect the language people use to describe themselves, yet also accept that language changes and that individuals within groups sometimes disagree about the designation they use.

Acknowledge People's Humanity: 2 Approaches

• Person-first Language

In person-first language, the person is emphasized, not some other aspect of their identity.

- **Avoid**→ For the purposes of this study **schizophrenics** are defined as people who scored high on the Adolescent Psychopathology Scale.
- **Person-first**→ For the purposes of this study **participants with schizophrenia** are defined as people who scored high on the Adolescent Psychopathology Scale.

• Identity-first Language

In identity-first language, one aspect of someone's identity (e.g., a disability) is focused on.

- Some groups prefer the identity-first label (e.g., some Deaf people prefer the term "Deaf person" rather than "person who is deaf").
- In APA, it is permissible to use either approach – or to mix the 2 approaches – unless you know that a group clearly prefers one. Be sure to research the preferred labels of members of the group.

Capitalize Racial & Ethnic Terms ([APA 7 Guidelines for Racial & Ethnic Identity](#))

Examples include: Black, White, Latinx, Native American, Indigenous Peoples.

- Do not use hyphens in multiword names like: "Asian American participants"

APA 7 Bias-Free Language Guidelines continued

Avoid False Hierarchies

Bias may occur when authors use one group (often their own) as a standard of comparison, e.g., contrasting LGBTQ+ people with “the general public” or “normal people.” This is particularly important when writing about marginalized groups.

- Use parallel designations for groups, especially for racial and ethnic information.
- Do not list groups in order of social dominance by default (e.g., “men and women”).
 - **Not parallel**→ Both white and African American therapists were both found to display similar attitudes towards psychotherapy.
 - **Parallel; Capitalize racial & ethnic terms**→ Black and White therapists were both found to display similar attitudes towards psychotherapy.
- Be cautious when referring to groups as “minorities”; this term should only be used for a population subgroup with characteristics different from the majority of the population.
 - To be specific, modify it: e.g., “racial minority”, “ethnic minority”, “religious minority”
- Similarly be cautious about the term “underprivileged”
 - It may be more accurate to use “economically marginalized” or “economically exploited”

Gender and Pronoun Usage (APA 7 Guidelines for Gender)

- Do not refer to the pronouns used by transgender and gender-nonconforming people as “preferred pronouns” because this implies a choice; instead use “self-identified pronouns” or “pronouns.”
- **Singular use of “they”**
 - When referring to individuals whose pronouns are not known or when the gender of a generic or hypothetical person is irrelevant, use singular “they” to avoid making assumptions.
 - This singular use of “they” has been in the English language since the 14th century.
 - **Avoid**→ Each patient should be told in advance how much he/she will be required to pay.
 - **Correct**→ Each patient should be told in advance how much they will be required to pay.
- Avoid using any term that implies binary gender, e.g., “opposite sex” (use “another sex” instead)

Intersectionality (APA 7 Guidelines for Intersectionality)

- When authors write about personal characteristics, they should be sensitive to **intersectionality**: the way in which individuals are shaped by and experience privilege and/or oppression due to intersecting/overlapping cultural, structural, sociobiological, economic, and social contexts.
 - According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term, “We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts” ([Crenshaw, as cited in Steinmetz, 2020](#)).
- Because people are unique, many identities are possible. For example, Black lesbian women may experience discrimination differently than White women or Black men.
- To address intersectionality in a paper, identify individuals’ relevant characteristics and group memberships (e.g., ability and/or disability status, age, gender, gender identity, generation, historical as well as ongoing experiences of marginalization, immigrant status, language, national origin, race and/or ethnicity, religion or spirituality, sexual orientation, social class, and socioeconomic status, among other variables) and describe how they intersect in ways that are relevant to the study.