

A group of seven diverse students and one teacher, all wearing face masks, standing in a classroom. The background shows a chalkboard with mathematical diagrams and letters. The image has a light teal overlay.

# **INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE**

**A GUIDE FOR  
INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS  
AND WORKPLACES  
IN MANITOBA**



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Manitoba Teachers' Society acknowledges with gratitude the contributions of staff and committee members who have contributed to this document.

This guide is a living document that will continue to evolve alongside the growth in our knowledge and appreciation. We are committed to continue the conversations around inclusion in all facets and appreciate continued feedback.



## Using Inclusive Language in the Workplace and Schools

Acknowledging our responsibility with systems of education, we must strive to create learning spaces that are safe and caring. In using language that is free from words, phrases or tones that reflect prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups of people, we are committing to use inclusive language.

The purpose of this guide is intended to support respectful schools and workplaces by paying attention to how language is used to ensure safe and caring spaces. Although rarely is it the intent to exclude or offend a person or group of people, our language can often have that negative impact. Developing our awareness of how language impacts those around us supports this purpose.

As educators, we understand the importance of curiosity and growth mindset. We approach the work of inclusive language with these qualities and are evolving in our understanding of diversity perspectives. We hope that this guide will be an evolving document that will continue the conversations about inclusion for all in Manitoba schools and workplaces.

# Guiding Principles

The principles identified by the BC Public Service for its employees are equally relevant and the following principles are fundamental in using inclusive language:

- **People first.** Many general principles provided in this guide involve seeing the person as an individual first and becoming aware of diverse audiences.
- **Words matter.** Not only do terms and expressions allow people or groups to feel excluded, but they can also convey or embed stereotypes, expectations or limitations.
- **Language changes.** All language changes to reflect the values of society. As language changes, so do the norms that deem what is socially and grammatically acceptable.
- **Mindset matters.** It is important to keep a curious and empathetic mindset. Most language has evolved to reflect the values and norms of the mainstream or dominant culture, and if a person is a member of that culture, they have had the privilege to feel included the majority of the time. That is not the case for everyone.
- **Inclusive terms.** Try to make your language and your message as inclusive as possible. For example, when speaking to an audience, make sure your speech relates to all your listeners and uses gender-inclusive language.
- **Use of generalizations or stereotypes.** No matter your audience, be cautious about making sweeping statements about any social group. This includes making personal assumptions based on gender, culture, ancestry, age and other categories.
- **Use of prejudiced language.** Take time to educate yourself about what words, phrases, or perspectives may offend your listeners. One goal of an audience-centered, inclusive speaker is to be cautious about prejudiced language or remarks.
- **Self-reflection.** Bring self-awareness to the times when you use words and expressions in writing. Think about your intentions for using a phrase, whether it has any origins, and whether there is a more inclusive way to state what you are trying to say.

It may also be helpful to ask:

- Does the individual or group have preferred terms?
- Does the language reflect the diversity of the intended audience?
- Is reference to a person's gender, culture, ethnicity, age, etc. relevant?
- Am I staying open and curious, and encouraging others to do the same?
- Is there a need to consult a formal style guide such as *The Canadian Press Stylebook*, *APA Style*, or other resources such as *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* for guidance on written communication standards?

## CULTURE, RACE AND ANCESTRY

Historically, there has been a hierarchical portrayal of cultural and racial groups. Today, language still has the potential to label groups of people as inferior or superior to others. Acknowledging that preferred terms change as society evolves, it is important to be aware and respectful of preferences of those we interact with.

The following are some important considerations for inclusive interactions with diverse cultural and racial groups:

- Capitalize the proper names of nationalities, peoples and culture. For detailed guidance on capitalization of proper nouns, consider using a formal style guide. Some examples include: Jewish, Indigenous people, Sikh, Caucasian, Muslim, Inuit, Arab, Asian, Cree, etc.

- Be cautious about racial, cultural and other identity references that are not necessary, or assume similarities and affinity. Instead of saying, “Have you met Dan? He’s Asian too. You two would get along,” consider saying, “Have you met Dan? He’s new to the team.” Avoid making assumptions about people and assuming that they share personal traits, interests or similarities based on their gender, race, culture, class, heritage, status or appearance.
- Consider when terms such as “visible minority” and “woman of colour” are relevant. Terms such as “visible minority” and “woman of colour” have often been used in writing and discussion; however, they are becoming less used. Before using such expressions, carefully consider if they are as relevant or current as in the past, or if a better expression or more specific identifier is available.
- Be cautious about introducing or describing someone by their race, culture or ancestry. Consider whether identification based on race, culture, or ancestry is relevant. Culture is a very fluid and dynamic concept that may not reflect the complexity of individual identities. Whenever possible, allow a person to introduce aspects of their identity that they choose to share.
- When references are relevant and necessary, find the appropriate, widely-accepted terminology and use the language preferred by the individual or group concerned. Preferred terminology depends on the preferences of the individual or group, and may change on the basis of location. For example, in the United States, “African-American” is used; in Canada, some people in African-Canadian communities prefer the term “Black,” while others prefer “African-Canadian.”

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

We recognize the importance that language plays in a spirit of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. There are three distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: First Nations, Métis and Inuit. “Indigenous Peoples” is commonly used as a collective term for all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. “Indigenous people” with a lower case “people” is simply referring to more than one Indigenous person rather than the collective group of Indigenous Peoples.

It is helpful to be aware of the following terms:

- Indigenous is a general term and is a preferred term in international writing and discussion that is gaining broader acceptance in Canada. In Canada, Indigenous collectively refers to people who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. More specifically:
- First Nations describes people who identify as First Nations, which have distinct cultures, languages and traditions and connections to a particular land base of traditional territory.
- Métis is a French term for “mixed blood,” which refers to the specific group of Indigenous people who trace their ancestry to the Métis homeland and are accepted members of the Métis community.
- Inuit refers to a group of people who share cultural similarities and inhabit the Arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, Russia and the United States of America. Inuit is a plural noun, and the singular is Inuk. Also note that “Inuit” means “people,” so it is redundant to say “Inuit people.”
- Indian in reference to an Indigenous person is a historical misnomer with negative meanings for many Indigenous people as an imposed term. Use of this term should be avoided unless it is part of a historical reference, part of a legacy term, or used in reference to a government policy or classification, for example, “Indian Act,” or “status Indian”. While there are some status First Nations who prefer this term, “Indian” is considered an “in-group” term for their use.
- Aboriginal may be used in reference to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. However, it is no longer the preferred term because there is ambiguity regarding negative associations with this term. As language use is constantly changing, the term “Indigenous” is commonly used.

## POLITICAL BELIEFS

People are protected from discrimination based on their political beliefs and these beliefs cannot affect how they are treated by others. An awareness that people come from various backgrounds which could potentially have been influenced by their upbringing, culture and parental views. It is fundamental to recognize the difference between respecting a person, regardless of their political belief, and allowing personal opinions to affect the way a person is treated. Being respectful does not mean that one must agree with an opinion, rather it means being considerate of others' opinions.

## RELIGION

Protection from discrimination based on religion or faith may include several considerations depending on the operation and workplace. Respecting a person's religious beliefs in the workplace may include:

- Altering schedules to recognize religious observances.
- Reviewing dress code to accommodate religious or faith-based protocols.
- Offering nutritional options to respect dietary accommodations.

Respecting a person's religious beliefs also requires the use of language that is inclusive and appropriate. An example provided by the BC Workplace suggests that "instead of asking a person of Jewish or Sikh faith their "Christian name", the use of the term "first name" prevents any misunderstandings and acknowledges people have different beliefs.

## MARITAL AND FAMILY STATUS

There is a wide range of family types, including single parent, blended families, adopted and common-law relationships. Regardless of the gender of two people in a couple, the inclusive term "spouse" or "partner" are appropriate.

The following are additional suggestions for inclusivity:

- Avoid the question of marital or family status by using names only in both written and oral form.
- When a person identifies as being married or in a relationship, avoid making references to gender (husband or wife), if unknown.
- Refer to a person's "birth parent" rather than "natural parent" or "real parent".

## DISABILITY

In conversation with or about a person with a disability, it is important to focus on the individual and not their disability. Preferences regarding language related to differently able people varies and is sometimes inconsistent. It is appropriate to ask the person in a discreet manner. Be prepared that some individuals may be more comfortable than others with sharing of personal information and to be sensitive to the reality that disabilities (and chronic conditions such as mental illness) are both visible and non-visible.

The following are some suggestions for ensuring inclusivity:

- "person with a disability" is the currently preferred term. Other references, such as "handicapped" are considered offensive.
- Focus on the individual first, the disability after. For example, instead of saying "disabled person", say "person with a disability"

- Generally, frame a disability and most medical conditions as something a person has rather than what they are. For example, “She has a disability” not “She is disabled”, “He has arthritis” not “He is arthritic”, “She has epilepsy” not “She is epileptic.” For certain sensory conditions, people may prefer more direct language. For example, “He is deaf” rather than “He has deafness” or “She is blind” rather than “She has blindness.”
- Be mindful when referring to groups. Be cautious about referring to a group of individuals as the “disabled.” Instead, use references such as “person with disabilities,” “people with quadriplegia,” and “student with a developmental disability”.
- Be cautious about using language that suggests weakness or infirmity. Instead of saying “a person confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair-bound,” it is more appropriate to say “the student uses a wheelchair.” People use mobility or adaptive equipment as tools for greater independence.
- Be cautious about portraying a person as “courageous” or “special” just because they have a disability. Describing a person with a disability as “courageous” or “special” because they have “overcome” a disability implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents and the ability to contribute in society.
- If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologize and move on. Persons with disabilities are generally willing to educate others about their needs and preferences. A person may say the wrong thing, but apologizing for mistakes and exhibiting a commitment to learn are positive steps.

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION

Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression have different meanings and are subjective and unique to the individual. It is also important to understand that the acronym 2SLGBTQIA+ is a term that represents many but not all groups as there are many more identities as well. An equally important understanding of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression is acknowledging that language is evolving and as we re-learn to be more inclusive, it is helpful to be mindful of inclusive terms and definitions.

Language has the power to take on unnecessary gendered forms which are used to distinguish between women and men. For example, “manpower” could be replaced with language like “workforce,” “personnel,” or “human resources.” The use of third person pronouns is one of the most powerful ways that we can encourage and create inclusion.

### Terms and Definitions

- Cisgender refers to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.
- Gender expression refers to how a person publicly presents their gender.
- Gender identity refers to a person’s internal and external experience of gender which may be the same or different from their sex at birth.
- Sex refers to the external physical characteristics used to classify humans at birth. AFAB - Assigned female at birth. AMAB - Assigned male at birth.
- Sexual orientation refers to whom one is sexually and/or romantically attracted.
- Transgender is an umbrella term to describe a wide range of people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth and/or the societal and cultural expectations of their assigned sex.

### Pronouns

Pronouns, words used to reference a person without using their name, are an important part of our



identity. Language is important when speaking about identity because it creates respect by allowing people to use language that describes their identity. To create an inclusive space for all, it is important to refer to people using the pronouns with which they identify.

The BC Public Service document *Words Matter: Guidelines on Using Inclusive Languages in Workplaces* provides the following general principles for creating inclusivity:

<p><b>Be cautious about making assumptions.</b></p>	<p>All people do not look a certain way or come from the same background, and many may not appear "visibly trans." Rather, one should assume that an audience might include gender nonconforming people.</p>
<p><b>Gender identity or expression and sexual orientation are different.</b></p>	<p>Gender identity refers to a person's internal and external experience of gender which may be the same or different from their sex at birth. Gender expression refers to how a person publicly presents their gender. Sexual orientation refers to who one is sexually and/or romantically attracted to.</p>
<p><b>Take the time to listen if the pronouns are not known.</b></p>	<p>Double checking the use of terminology and language descriptors confers respect and can contribute to the development of most relationships. If the pronoun that a person uses is not known, listen first to the pronoun other people use when referring to that person. If you accidentally use the wrong pronoun, apologize immediately and sincerely, and then move on.</p>
<p><b>Be considerate about names.</b></p>	<p>Respect the name a gender nonconforming person is currently using. For some people, being associated with their birth name is a source of anxiety, or it is simply a part of their life they wish to leave behind. If you happen to know the name someone was given at birth but no longer uses, refrain from sharing it without the person's explicit permission.</p>
<p><b>Respect a person's privacy.</b></p>	<p>Some people feel comfortable disclosing their status to others, and some do not. Knowing a gender nonconforming person's status is private and it is up to them to share it.</p>
<p><b>Respect terminology.</b></p>	<p>People use many different terms to describe their experiences. Respect the term (transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc.) that a person uses.</p>

Here are some suggestions for inclusive terms:

WORD OR PHRASE	SUGGESTION
Whoever gets promoted will have his or her pay increased.	Whoever is promoted will get a raise.
Each student should read his book quietly.	Students should read their books quietly.
Invite your boyfriend or husband.	Invite your partner or spouse.
Cleaning lady, policeman, chairman	Cleaner, police officer, chairperson
Sexual preference	Sexual orientation

## AGE

Ever increasingly, workplaces are inter-generational environments, and we must be aware about the bias that is perceived when referring to age, whether in reference to a younger or older person. By avoiding language that stereotypes a specific age group, we are creating inclusive spaces for all generations.

While the term “elderly” implies a stereotype, one important exception to the term is in the reference to Indigenous Elders. This title is considered an honour that comes with age and wisdom by the community.

WORDS TO AVOID	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES
The elderly, aged, old people	Older person, older people, older citizens, older adults
Young and vibrant team	Effective and vibrant team
How would you feel about managing older/younger people?	What skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team?



## Ensuring Respectful Workplaces

Each school and workplace is a unique and diverse space. While one's intention might not be to explicitly stereotype or offend another person, the language one uses can have a negative impact. Being aware and open to learning about the diversity that exists is a fundamental first step in creating inclusive spaces. Being mindful of our choice of words and acknowledging when mistakes are made is another important part of the journey.

When you find yourself responding, "I didn't intend to hurt anyone," shift your perspective to the person you offended. Have you considered the impact on this person? When you focus on the impact you have on others, you demonstrate a willingness to demonstrate accountability and commit to do better.

It is also important to be aware of Manitoba's Workplace Safety and Health legislation and your employer's policies about harassment in the workplace. If your use of certain language causes a colleague to believe they are being harassed, you may be subject to discipline by your employer. Using inclusive language and being mindful of others' rights contributes to a respectful workplace and protects you from harassment allegations.

The evolving guidelines offered in this document can reinforce inclusive language that recognizes and celebrates diversity in all its forms in school and workplaces. Affirming language has the power to create bridges towards building relationships and communities.



## References and Recommended Resources

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