THE GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA'S INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE

Why is Inclusive Language Important?

Words are one of the most commonly used and most powerful tools at our disposal. The language that we use on a daily basis can both bridge gaps in understanding and create new ones—intentionally or unintentionally. **Inclusive language** prioritizes communicating with intention to ensure that everyone feels welcome, safe, and valued. Furthermore, it encourages equitable opportunities for everyone. In contrast, **exclusive language** (language that separates individuals from a space or experience by nature of their varying identities) creates a culture of alienation and damages relationships in addition to perpetuating inaccurate views of different cultural and social groups. Exclusive language can also be violent language. In this context, we are referring to language use itself as an act of violence, not language that describes or names acts of violence. For example, a slur is violent language, while the word "robbery" refers to a crime. **When we talk about avoiding violent language, we mean that we want to make sure that the words we use are not perpetuating harm against historically marginalized communities.**

It's important to remember that **language use is a practice**. We can train ourselves to use different words than the ones we are accustomed to using. It may seem like a daunting task, but like all practices, improvement only comes with continuing to try. The Geological Society of America (GSA) advocates for an inclusive culture in the geosciences. As such, we've created this *Inclusive Language Guide* as a starting point and reference for how to put inclusive language into practice.

This guide is not intended to serve as a monolithic list of "right" words and "wrong" words. **The focus of conversations about inclusive language is not to give everyone a static list of what to say and/or not say, but to offer a framework for how to rethink the way we use language about people's identities—both visible and invisible.** This is meant to be a living document, and as such, a list of specific words would not serve the end goal of inclusivity. Such a document would eventually become obsolete as the standards for using specific words and phrases changes over time. Furthermore, it would potentially create an environment where the "rightness" or "wrongness" of language use becomes more important than the impact that we have on marginalized communities and the geoscience community as a whole. It is possible to say something offensive about a community while using "green light" language; saying all of the right words doesn't mean that harm isn't being done. This document is intended to encourage GSA employees, partners, authors, and members to consider how they can use language in a more inclusive way, fostering better individual connections and communication within the broader geoscience community.

General Guidelines

It's important to note that empathy, respect, and a willingness to alter your language use based on feedback are all more important than saying the perfect thing every time. Individuals often have different language-use preferences within their communities, and language is an ever-evolving tool. No guide should be set in stone, nor is this guide meant to instill a fear of "getting it wrong." The most important rule of inclusive language use is: **When you're unsure what language to use, ask; when you're corrected, express gratitude and change your language use accordingly.** Assume that at some point, you *will* say the wrong thing. It happens to all of us because we all have different levels of experience with inclusive language and our own intersectional identities. When this happens, (1) apologize briefly (excessive apologies and self-admonishment make *you* the focus of the exchange, not the person who has been harmed by *your* language use); (2) thank the person who told you; and (3) make an intentional, conscious effort to use the language that you have been asked to use instead.

In the following sections, more background and information is provided for several common intersections of identity. These are not listed in any particular order, so importance should not be assumed from a top-down basis. All aspects of an individual's identity are important to consider and be respectful of.

Gender Identity, Sex, and Sexual Orientation

- **Gender** refers to socially constructed ideas related to anatomy.
- **Sex** refers to a person's anatomy.
- **Sexual orientation** refers to a person's sexual and/or romantic attraction.

Gender and sexual orientation are typically defined as a spectrum while sex is commonly considered a binary, but it is important to note that recent research has indicated that sex is also a spectrum. The most important language-use rule regarding these identities is to never assume anyone's gender, sex, or sexual orientation based on appearance, voice, or name. In most contexts, it is never appropriate to ask someone about their sex or sexual orientation. It is also often not necessary to ask someone about their gender, but making sure that you use the correct pronouns when referring to someone is important. Practicing inclusive language in regards to gender, sex, and sexual orientation runs across a spectrum, from not using derogatory terms or slurs (see notes on reclaimed slurs in the "Cultural Diversity" section) for members of the LGBTQIAP+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, and pansexual—plus) community to making language gender neutral as much as possible (e.g., "firefighter" rather than "fireman").

Respecting and using someone's pronouns is an important part of inclusivity as a whole, not just inclusive language. If someone does not indicate what their pronouns are (e.g., in their Zoom name, in an email signature, with a button or sticker while at an event, etc.) and you want to make sure you're using the correct pronouns when referring to them, just ask. Best practice is

to word it as "What are your pronouns?" rather than "What are your *preferred* pronouns?" since the former gives respect to a person's pronouns as part of who they are.

It is also incredibly important to be aware of the impact that deadnaming has and to avoid doing so. To deadname someone means to refer to someone with a name they no longer use, primarily a transgender or non-binary person, if they have changed their name after transitioning. **Deadnaming can be unintentional or it can be a deliberate attempt to belittle, mock, invalidate, or harass a transgender or non-binary person. Either way, deadnaming is a harmful act.** Refer to someone using the name they have asked you to use, regardless of what name might otherwise appear in an official capacity (e.g., on a driver's license); the process of legally changing a person's name takes time, and people who have transitioned and are using a lived name (the name they have chosen for themselves) often have their deadname on their government-issued documents. When you accidentally deadname someone, thank them for informing you of their lived name and use it going forward.

They/them/theirs pronouns are used in GSA publications in reference to individuals who use they/them pronouns, individuals whose pronouns are unknown, and groups. This is a common practice in the English language (e.g., "Someone left *their* umbrella here."). According to the [Oxford English Dictionary](#), "The Oxford English Dictionary traces singular they back to 1375, where it appears in the medieval romance *William and the Werewolf.*" In publications, the use of they/them or omitting a pronoun altogether is preferred to the use of he/him or she/her [e.g., use "Smith (2000, fig. 5)" or "Smith (2000, their fig. 5)" or "fig. 5 in Smith (2000)" instead of "Smith (2000, his fig. 5)"] unless an individual's pronouns are known by the author(s) personally.

Disability and Invisible Illness

A large portion of people in the world are living with disabilities and chronic illness, many of which aren't apparent at a first glance. **Best practices for communicating about people with disabilities or invisible illnesses include using person-first language** (e.g., "a person who is blind" rather than "a blind person"), which prioritizes the people themselves rather than an aspect of their identity, and avoiding euphemisms (e.g., "special needs") and expressions that highlight a person's disability as the primary aspect of their identity or infantilize people with disabilities. Additionally, avoid words and phrases that add unnecessary emotional weight to the fact that someone has a disability or an illness (e.g., "hero" or "suffers from"). Slurs and derogatory language should also be avoided.

It is also important to note that many disabilities or chronic illnesses are invisible; you can't tell if they impact someone's life at a first glance. Because of this invisibility, these disabilities and illnesses are often ignored or trivialized. Be aware of the language that you use to talk about disabilities and illnesses, regardless of whether or not you know that a person has a disability or illness. **Listen to how people describe or talk about themselves and their experiences, and use that language.**

Cultural Differences: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

Cultural diversity includes a wide range of identities based on ancestry, nationality, and shared culture. "**Race** refers to the concept of dividing people into groups on the basis of various sets of physical characteristics and the process of ascribing social meaning to those groups. **Ethnicity** describes the culture of people in a given geographic region, including their language, heritage, religion and customs" (Washington University in St. Louis, "Race and Ethnicity Self-Study Guide"). From a biological perspective, race does not exist; it is, rather, a form of social categorization that is very often an important part of an individual's identity due to various social and historical factors (see Joseph L. Graves's article "Race [Does Not Equal] DNA").

Never assume that you know someone's race, ethnicity, or nationality based on appearance, name, language, accent, or dialect. **Always defer to the language that a racial, ethnic, or national community has requested to be used in reference to themselves**, and never use racial or ethnic slurs. Some communities use certain words while requesting that other communities do not. In these instances, defer to the requests of communities that you are not a part and do not police their language use. Reclaimed slurs are the primary example of this. These words have violent histories attached to them, and the practice of reclaiming slurs is often seen as an act of resistance to the oppression that the communities they target have faced and continue to face. That being said, no community is a monolith, and there are differing views on the reclamation of slurs among all communities. If you are not a member of the community that a slur was created to demean, oppress, and dehumanize, do not use the word.

When referring to a group of people based on race, ethnicity, or nationality, avoid terms that group several different communities into one category (e.g., "BIPOC"; see Virginia Law Review's article "Why BIPOC Fails" for more information). Instead, **use the language that the community you're referring to has asked to be used. If you're referring to several communities, name them all individually.**

Often, asking someone about their cultural identity or background is irrelevant to the conversation. If you do need to ask, avoid insensitive phrasing (e.g., "What are you?") and don't ask someone where they're from unless you're literally asking where they currently live.

Mental, Emotional, and Cognitive Differences

Often, people use terminology for mental and emotional health diagnoses to describe their behavior and moods in a general sense (e.g., saying "I'm so OCD" when color-coding your calendar or tidying up your workspace). This trivializes the experience of people who have been diagnosed with and who deal with these actual medical conditions or cognitive differences every day. **Neurodiversity (the differences in the way that people's brains work) includes a wide range of diagnoses, and inclusive language seeks to avoid prioritizing these potential aspects of a person's identity.** Being neurodiverse is not the whole of who a person is, and therefore, person-first language should be used.

It is also important to note that not all cognitive differences come with a diagnosis. Some people are better at spatial visualization than at remembering names. These differences are normal and common and all bring value to our interactions, communication, and relationships. Avoid using derogatory or demeaning language at all times, especially offensive terms that are holdovers from a time when mental, emotional, and cognitive differences were viewed in a negative light and mental health treatment was often discriminatory and abusive (e.g., "demented").

Physicality

We live in a world with a wide range of natural human diversity. There is no such thing as a "normal" human body. Therefore, best practice is always to avoid mentioning a person's physical appearance at all. If describing a person in physical terms is necessary, defer to something along the lines of, "She is the person at the welcome desk wearing a blue shirt." Several words that are used to describe a person's appearance can reinforce stereotypes or perpetuate shame culture around what people's bodies look like. **Keep in mind that physical descriptors are often irrelevant to a conversation, and avoid them as a general practice.**

Religion

Religion and a person's relationship with religion are aspects of an individual's identity that are invisible. Still, it is common for an individual's religion to be assumed based on their physical appearance (e.g., clothing) or other aspects of their identity (e.g., nationality). Many people identify culturally with a religion but do not actively practice it, while others may practice religious traditions that are not a part of their cultural background. **This means that it is very important to avoid unneeded comments or conversations about religion and to be sensitive to religious differences at all times.**

It's often unnecessary to talk about a person's religion, unless you're having a personal conversation. That being said, a good general rule for referring to a religious group as a whole—especially one that you are not a part of—is to use the name of the religion as an adjective rather than a noun (e.g. "Jewish people" rather than "Jews") or to refer to someone's religious practices as such rather than primary elements of their identity (e.g., "She is a follower of Buddhist traditions" or "He is a member of a Catholic congregation").

Acquired Diversity/Other

Some aspects of a person's identity are gained through life experiences. These forms of diversity can come and go from a person's life, and they include a broad range of factors (e.g., age, marital status, immigration status, trauma, veteran status, or medical conditions). **Inclusive language prioritizes avoiding slang and idioms that trivialize people's lived experiences** (e.g, avoid referring to your love of coffee as a "caffeine addiction" since addiction has severe and harmful impacts on people's lives; avoid referring to a difficult meeting as a "war zone" since combat veterans often experience severe post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] because of their experiences).

Specific Words and Phrases to Avoid

Several commonly used words and phrases have been removed from their cultural or historical contexts and are now used in offensive ways, most of the time without anyone's awareness of their original meaning and impact. The following table contains a list of several common examples as well as information on why they should be avoided and alternatives. While the goal of an inclusive language guide is to avoid lists, it is still important to identify commonly used phrases that are unintentionally offensive or exclusionary.

Less Inclusive/Avoid	More Inclusive/Preferred	Reasoning
Powwow	Meeting, get-together	"Powwow" refers to a sacred gathering or ceremony for several Indigenous and Native American tribes. As such, referring to a business meeting or a lunch gathering using this term is cultural appropriation.
Tribe Spirit Animal	Friends, network, team	Referring to a group of people who are not actually an Indigenous tribe as such is cultural appropriation. So is referring to something as your "spirit animal," since spirit animals are considered sacred to several Indigenous and Native American peoples.
Grandfathered/ Grandfathered in	Legacy, exempted, excused, preapproved	The term "grandfathered" has racist origins. It comes from old laws in many southern U.S. states that were intended to prevent Black men from voting; many of these laws waived strict voting requirements for men who were descendants of anyone who had voted prior to 1867. This allowed white men with lower socioeconomic status to vote while preventing Black men from voting entirely.
G***y G*p (spelled with a "y" or an "i")	Use Romani to refer to a person of Romani descent. If referring to someone who lives a nomadic lifestyle, use "nomad" or "nomadic" (e.g., digital nomads, van-lifers, etc.) Use the term "cheat" or "cheated" to refer to dishonesty or dishonest	The Romani are an ethnic group that are traditionally nomadic and have been historically persecuted throughout Europe and the Americas. The term "g***y" originated as a slur based on the term "Egyptian" (many locals in Britain thought this was where the Romani people immigrated to the British isles from). As such, the term "g*p" evokes racist attitudes about the Romani people.

	business practices.	
Cakewalk Takes the cake	That was easy.	The "cakewalk" was a processional dance often performed by enslaved people in the Americas, and baked goods were the primary prize. This dance was appropriated by white minstrel show performers, who portrayed Black people in a derogatory and insulting way.
Rule of thumb	General rule Standard	This expression is derived from an English law that allowed men to physically abuse their wives using any stick so long as it was no thicker than their thumb.
No can do/ Long time no see	I can't do it./ I haven't seen you in a while.	Both of these phrases were originally used to mock people who didn't speak English as a first language but were trying to learn (primarily Asian immigrants and Native Americans).
Peanut gallery	Crowd Audience	While this phrase is used commonly to refer to people with ill-informed commentary, it has its origins in vaudeville era theaters. This term originally referred to the cheapest and worst seats, which also served as the segregated seating for Black audience members.
Sold down the river	Betrayed	During the era of slavery in the United States, enslaved people were often sold multiple times and progressively further south, where conditions were much harsher.
Ghetto	Do not use the term to refer to a person's traits or to the perceived value of a neighborhood. Since the term is used to describe people in a negative and often racist way, there isn't an alternative in that use case. When referring to the socioeconomic conditions of a neighborhood, use phrases such as "lower income" instead.	While the etymology of the word "ghetto" is unknown, the term was first used to name the Venetian Ghetto in Cannaregio (1516–1797), the city's Jewish quarter. Over time, the term has been applied to crowded urban areas populated primarily by minority groups. Using this term in the context of referring to areas that were officially named Ghettos at some point in history (e.g., the Venetian Ghetto) is not technically inappropriate, but since the word "ghetto" has become a derogatory term for neighborhoods whose residents occupy a lower socioeconomic status, it should be avoided. It also has been used to describe traits that are associated with Black and/or Latine culture in the United States (e.g., using African American Vernacular English [AAVE]).

Low (man) on the totem pole	Low priority, lowest rung on the ladder, least significant	For several Indigenous and Native American tribes, totem poles are used to convey family history. Using the term to refer to a person's position in a company or organizational hierarchy is cultural appropriation.
Climbing the totem pole	Advancing, (being) promoted, climbing the corporate ladder	

Location Names and Land Acknowledgment Statements

A common issue, particularly in the United States and Canada, is the use of racial slurs in names of landforms, locations, etc. In particular, the term "sq***" is prevalent. This term reflects a view of Indigenous women particular to the colonial violence of North American history and is therefore both a gendered and racial slur. Its use in renaming the landscapes of North America was and is indicative of the violence that occurred during westward expansion on this continent. As such, **efforts should be made to not only rename these locations in an official capacity, but to avoid using these names in publications, media, and other written materials regardless of whether or not they have been officially renamed.** This term is not the only one to consider, but it does exemplify a major issue with language use in geography, geology, and other academic disciplines.

As an alternative to using slurs and other offensive language in research, social media posts, and other methods of communicating geological insights, consider putting a bit of extra time into trying to find out what the Indigenous peoples of the area where your research is occurring called the landform or place and using that name instead. A quick Google search can often give you all of the information you need. For example, in Colorado, USA, a mountain in Clear Creek was renamed from one that included a slur to Mestaa'ėhehe Mountain in 2021 to honor Mestaa'ėhehe (Owl Woman), a Tsétsêhéstâhese (Cheyenne) woman, and her peacemaking efforts (more information about the name change and Mestaa'ėhehe can be found here). It's also important to consider how place names that don't use slurs can also be offensive and violent. As an example, the former Mount Evans in Colorado was officially renamed Mount Blue Sky in 2023 at the request of the Cheyenne and Hinono'eiteen (Arapaho) communities; the previous name honored a former governor of the state who led the 1865 Sand Creek Massacre against the Cheyenne and Arapaho, in which over 200 people were killed (more information here). Additionally, using names given to a location by Indigenous peoples is often an important sign of respect for Indigenous communities and their connection to their homelands. For instance, Zion Canyon (of Zion National Park) was given the name Mukuntuweap by the Numu (Paiute, "Numu" meaning "The People") people well before white settlers entered the region.

Another alternative, if a different name cannot be found, is to use the longitude and latitude coordinates of the landform in question. With either option, a brief explanation for

the deviation from the given name (or name used on most maps) can be supplied in the form of a footnote. As an example:

> "Due to the use of an offensive slur in the official/given name of this [insert kind of landform here], the authors have opted to use the [insert alternative name or "coordinates of this location" here] instead."

While alternatives to using a location's name in these circumstances adds to the word count of a given text, it's important to remember that the use of slurs or names honoring people who violently participated in colonialism (and therefore honoring the colonial violence itself) in geographic names is a violent practice–one that ultimately acts to exclude Indigenous people of any region from a sense of belonging. **While this section is focused on the use of names that are offensive to Indigenous communities in North America, these guidelines can be applied to names in any area with a history of colonial violence against Indigenous communities.** Wordiness is preferable if alternative names cannot be found. If you're worried about needing to meet word-limit requirements for publications, take a look at other areas of your text. There are likely several locations where a sentence or paragraph can be shortened or extraneous word use removed.

Furthermore, land acknowledgement statements play an important role in respecting the sovereignty of Indigenous communities worldwide. **If your research is taking place or took place on Native land, consider including a land acknowledgment statement in your paper's acknowledgments section.** There are several resources available for learning whose land a particular region is in and how to write a land acknowledgment statement.

- https://native-land.ca/ allows you to search for the location in question and provides a global map of historical Indigenous homelands and territories.
- The Native-Land project also offers a guideline for writing land acknowledgement statements (https://native-land.ca/resources/territory-acknowledgement/).