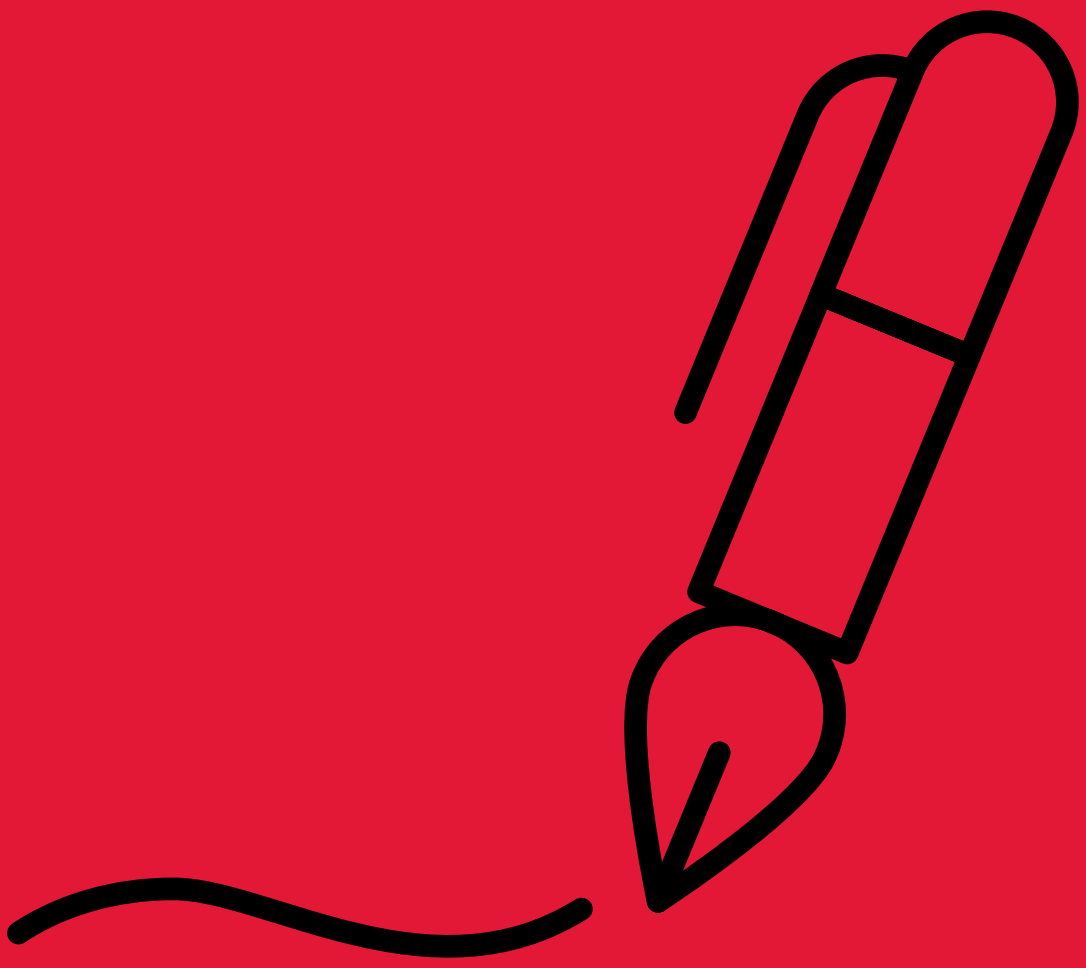
University of Amsterdam



Inclusive language in practice

A practical guide to inclusive communications

Central Diversity Office
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1. Let's get started!

The UvA aims to be an inclusive organisation for everyone. Being mindful of language contributes to psychological and social safety (p. 20). This language guide is for everyone who could use tips on communicating more inclusively. Whether you are working on a news item, a policy document, a social media post, a simple e-mail, or if you are sitting in a meeting and want to be considerate of the person across the table. This document is not primarily intended for academic texts, but we would never stop an independent-minded academic from using it.

With this guide, the Central Diversity Office and Bureau Communicatie aim to bring together the wealth of available information into a practical resource, written with UvA in mind. This is how we can become, be, and remain a learning organisation. As such, this document will never be finished. This guide is meant to encourage and support reflection on these issues and to offer practical suggestions as an addition to knowledge and communication skills.

Do you have additions, suggestions, or questions? Or do you see texts that could be written more inclusively? Please get in touch with the Central Diversity Office at diversity@uva.nl. Together, we can build a culture in which we remain curious and engaged with one another. There are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Everyone has (unconscious) biases and assumptions**. The language we use reflects how we see the world. Inclusive language aims to create space to bring those assumptions out into the open and this guide gives you tools to use language more consciously.
- **Language changes constantly**. Language evolves alongside changes in society. New words are introduced while others disappear. This process is often gradual: sometimes different words carry the same meaning, with one falling out of use while the other becomes more common. (RUG Diversity & Inclusion Office, 2025)
- **Ask questions**. Not sure how best to say something? Ask the people it concerns what their preference is. Feel free to contact the Central Diversity Office for advice as well. If you notice a socially unsafe situation developing, see the options available at Social safety - University of Amsterdam.
- **Making mistakes is human**. What matters most is that we take the time to learn from them. You may say or write something that comes across differently from what you intended. If someone takes the time and effort to point this out to you, it is worth pausing to reflect on it. The same applies in reverse: if someone says something hurtful, give them the space to learn from it too. All change takes time, so let us give one another the time to adjust to a different way of using language.

2. Checklist

No time to read through this entire document? This Checklist offers a comprehensive overview of this guide's most important points.

Steps	Actions	Check
1. Preparation	**Before you start, involve the people you are writing about.** Use the terms they use for themselves. Consult a diverse group of people.	☐
	Use accessible, plain language that almost everyone can understand. Can you not avoid a difficult or new term? Provide a brief explanation, for example in a footnote or glossary.	☐
2. Writing	**Use inclusive forms of address wherever possible.** Write dear 'all' instead of 'ladies and gentlemen', for example. If that is not possible, make sure you do not default to masculine forms. A useful tip is to expand he/she to include other pronouns.	☐
	'He or she can register in the system.' / 'You can register in the system.' 'They can register in the system.'	
	Addressing stereotypes and prejudice. Do not first confirm a stereotype or prejudice before going on to refute it. That includes framing it negatively using words like 'not'.	☐
	'Not all Amsterdammers are arrogant, really.' 'The idea that all Amsterdammers are arrogant, is not correct.' / 'Amsterdam is home to a very diverse mix of people with all kinds of different personalities, including [follow with a mix of, also, positive traits].'	
	Add nuance when writing about groups of people. A good example is UvA students. They are referred to as one group, yet they are a highly diverse body of students with many differences between them. A similar example is often used for 'the Muslim.' Muslims come in many shapes and forms. Failing to add nuance can unintentionally cast people in a negative light.	

	Show the many sides of people and avoid a one-dimensional image of a person or group. People have multiple identities and are not only queer, white, female, Black, or neurodivergent. They are also students, researchers, staff members, carers, someone's partner, brother, sister, and so on.	☐
	Avoid or limit terms that emphasise someone's 'otherness'. Only mention someone's identity when it is relevant; otherwise it is better to leave it out. Also make sure you put the person at the centre of your sentence, with identity characteristics as adjectives. - 'People with a migration background' - 'Transgenders' - 'Local residents' - 'Amsterdammers' - 'Transgender person'	☐
	Avoid stigmatising terms. This relates to words that dehumanise people.	☐
3. Editing	**Check for accessibility.** Nearly finished writing? In the interest of accessibility for everyone, consider the following: • Let the group of people the text is about read it through once more at this stage. • Is the text accessible for people with a visual impairment? Is it easy to read with text-to-speech software? • Are the words you have used easy to understand?	☐
4. Images, videos, and audio	**Depict a diverse group of people.** Is the text about students in a classroom? Make sure the image shows a variety of students with different physical characteristics. Consider gender, mobility aids, background/ethnicity, skin colour, and so on. Do use realistic images that fit the context. If the staff in a workplace are predominantly white women, for example, using an image of a highly varied group of colleagues in a job posting may give a misleading impression. **Tip**: Find a balance. You can supplement images with a sentence such as: UvA strives to reflect the diversity of society and therefore encourages people with diverse backgrounds to apply, even if you do not fully meet the required experience.	☐

- [ ] **Diversity in your imagery works for every topic.**
Do not only use photos of trans people when the subject is transgender-related, or photos of people of colour when the subject is racism.

- [ ] **Do not repeat stereotypes. Look at the roles the people depicted are playing.**
Look at the images. Do they confirm or challenge traditional role patterns? For example: a man in a position of power or an active stance (manager, lecturer) and a woman in a subordinate or passive role (secretary or assistant).

- [ ] **Accessibility in imagery.**
Provide all online images with alt attributes and image descriptions. Text-to-speech software cannot read an image, but it can read the description in an alt tag.
Also ensure sufficient contrast in images, such as black on white or dark red on light grey. When colours in charts, for example, are very similar, they become harder to read for people with colour blindness, among others.

- [ ] **Moving images, videos, and audio.**
In addition to images, UvA also uses video and audio content. For videos, it is important to add subtitles for people with a hearing impairment. The most inclusive option would be to also provide a sign language interpreter, but this is costly.
For audio content such as podcasts, you can improve accessibility by providing a full transcript of the spoken text, so people can read along.,

3. General advice

3.1 Keep it simple: B1 as a goal

Language level B1, plain English, is not only for people with a practical educational background. Professionals and those with an academic background also generally prefer reading B1-level texts over C1-level texts. B1 is easier and quicker to read. It is not condescending; it is accessible. A friendly tone plays a big part in that.

Around 80% of the Dutch population understands B1-level Dutch, and roughly 70% hold their own with B1-level English. At UvA, we are used to working at C1 or C2 level. UvA want to reflect society and is currently working hard on the transition to more open science. That makes it important to think carefully about the language level we use, both within UvA and in how we communicate with the world around us.

Important aspects of B1 language use:

- Use plain words wherever possible (words most people understand). Avoid complex language and jargon. If a term is important and unavoidable, put it in italics and explain it.

C1 / C2 words	B1 words
Valorisation	Bridging science and society
Dissemination	Sharing research findings
Intersectionality (p. 28)	Overlapping identities, how different parts of your identity come together, reinforce each other, or undermine each other
Interdisciplinary	Involving more than one subject area

- Short sentences matter. Vary short and longer sentences to keep the text from feeling monotonous. Avoid complex compound sentences that can become unwieldy.
- Use the active voice for verbs.
- Use subheadings every two or three paragraphs. This makes your text easier to scan.
- Use examples or lists to make your text clearer.
- Avoid figurative language such as idioms, as not everyone is familiar with them.

3.2 Avoid stereotypes

Stereotypes and generalisations make reality seem simpler than it is. They fail to do justice to the diversity of people, or to the diversity within groups. They can cause unintentional harm, reinforce exclusion, and maintain existing inequalities.

Choose your words carefully and avoid stereotypes. People often repeat or confirm a stereotype before going on to refute it. Research shows that refuting negative stereotypes in this way tends to backfire (Gawronski et al., 2008): the assumption remains active in the mind unconsciously, reinforcing negative associations in the brain (Felten, 2019).

3.3 Only mention characteristics when relevant

In many cases, mentioning someone's skin colour, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so on doesn't add anything to a text. In fact, it can sometimes reinforce stereotypes, prejudices, and othering (p.8).

In some cases, mentioning characteristics can be helpful. A professor may be interviewed about, among other things, the racism she has encountered in her career. In that case her skin colour and/or background is relevant. But if she is being interviewed about her research into cell division, that background information is not relevant to mention.

Not / less relevant	Relevant
The Jewish lecturer in philosophy of science discussed Hegel and Nietzsche.	The Central Diversity Officer has experience of exclusion based on his Jewish background.
The deaf student submitted his dissertation.	The deaf student was unable to attend the lecture because no English Sign Language interpreter was available.
The student of colour works in a supermarket.	The student of colour experienced misogynoir.

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

3.4 Avoid othering

Othering means reducing an entire group of people to the label of 'other'. This often happens unconsciously. When you use just one characteristic to describe a group, you reduce that entire group to that single trait, ignoring the differences within it. Even highlighting a positive characteristic is a form of othering: it positions that group against an assumed norm.

Also avoid words that define people by what they are not. Terms like 'non-Western' or 'non-Dutch-speaking' emphasise someone's difference from an assumed norm, which is itself a form of othering.

Examples of othering	Inclusief alternative
Queer people are so creative. We could really use that creativity.	Who do we know who is creative? We need a fresh perspective.
People from other cultures bring new insights. We could really use those insights.	A more diverse team brings diverse insights, more creativity, and freer thinking. That benefits our results.
Disabled people are so brave.	People with a physical disability or chronic illness face exclusion. It is society that is limiting.
Non-Dutch-speaking student	International student, dreamer (depending on context, see p. 26).

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

3.5 Put the person first

By using someone's identity as an adjective rather than a noun, you avoid reducing them to that single layer of identity. This applies to characteristics such as migration background, gender identity, disability, or sexual orientation.

The debate of person-first vs. identity-first is an important one in the autism community, amongst others (Kenny et al, 2016). Some people prefer to talk about themselves as an autistic person, where autism is part of their identity. Others prefer the person-first approach,



underlining the importance of putting their humanity before the label (Brown, 2011, Kenny et al, 2016). Both are valid positions and this is an example of the nuances in inclusive language.

Is it important for your text to say something about someone's identity? Make sure that characteristic does not overshadow the person themselves. We advise starting from a position that places the person first. If you are unsure, ask the person or group of people you are speaking about.

Language that can exclude	Language that can include
Addict, junkie	Person with an addiction, person struggling with addiction, person in recovery
Autistic (as a noun, the autistic)	Person with autism, an autistic person, person on the neurodivergent spectrum
Dwarf, midget	Person with dwarfism (skeletal dysplasia), little person
The disabled/the blind/the deaf/the handicapped	Person with a disability, person who is blind, person who is deaf, person with a hearing impairment
Hermaphrodite	Intersex person, person with an intersex variation/traits
HIV positive	Person living with HIV
Mentally ill	Person with a mental health condition, person experiencing mental health challenges
Vulnerable person	Person/group living in a vulnerable situation
Migrant	Person with a migration background (see 3.3)/person of colour
Minority group/someone from a minority group	Person/group with a marginalised identity. The word 'minority' should only be used in terms of numbers, yet it is also applied to groups such as women, even though they make up 51% of the Dutch population. We therefore use 'marginalised', as it refers to a group's position relative to a privileged group.
Wheelchair-bound	Person who uses a wheelchair. 'Bound' has a negative connotation; 'uses' is more neutral.
Hobo/tramp	Person who is homeless

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

3.6 Let your language reflect today's diversity

Alongside person-first language and the basic principles of plain language, it is also important to avoid outdated, problematic, and sexist language where possible. The terms below are examples of words that have become outdated, reminding us that language is always subject to change.

Avoid	Why?	Prefer
Blind spot	This metaphor refers to not being able to perceive something, but most people who use it are not blind. It can therefore be seen as ableist (p. 20).	Invisible gap
Caucasian	The term originates from the nineteenth-century racial science of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who classified people into races based on skull shape. This science is now discredited and has racist origins.	White
Crazy	'Crazy' is a stigmatising word that trivialises and ridicules mental health conditions.	Uninformed, unrealistic, ill-considered
Deaf interpreter	Dutch Sign Language is an officially recognised language in the Netherlands and is used by more than just people with a hearing impairment. 'Deaf interpreter' implies the interpreter is there solely for the deaf person, whereas a Sign Language interpreter facilitates mutual communication between a deaf and a hearing person.	Dutch (or English, Spanish, etc.) Sign Language interpreter
Exotic	'Exotic' comes from biology (an exotic plant is a non-native species). Using the word for a person can contribute to dehumanisation and stereotyping.	Describe what you see
Golden Age	The term Golden Age glorifies a financial 'high point' in Dutch history while ignoring the devastating consequences of colonialism and slavery.	Seventeenth century, colonial period
Highly / lowly educated	'High' and 'low' carry an (unconscious) value judgement. 'Academic' and 'vocational' focus on the nature of the education and do justice to the value both forms bring to society.	Academic versus vocational education Theoretic versus practical training

Middle East	Middle East originates from colonial times and is based on a European perspective. It positions the region 'in the middle' between Europe and the Far East, as though Europe is the centre. This makes the term Eurocentric and reinforces colonial power relations.	West Asia
Prostitute (or whore)	'Sex worker' is a more inclusive term that acknowledges the diverse aspects of the profession, with respect for those who do the work.	Sex worker
Slaves	It is important to acknowledge that a person is not born a slave, but is enslaved by others within a colonial and racist system.	Enslaved person
Third world	This term dates from the Cold War era. It implies a hierarchy and reinforces the stereotype that 'the West', or the 'first world', is superior.	Global South, or name the specific countries
Tone deaf	This term is ableist, attributing a disability to someone who is not actually deaf. It implies a connection between the disability and undesirable behaviour.	Insensitive Tactless
Transsexual	Gender identity is far broader than its medical dimension alone. 'Transsexual' reduces the experience to the body or sexuality and medicalises unnecessarily.	Transgender person
Victim	Sometimes the word victim does acknowledge and affirm that a person has been wronged, but many people have a negative association with the word. The word 'disclosing person' is a HR term and places agency back with the person concerned, for example in cases of (sexual) boundary-crossing behaviour. The word 'victim' is therefore not inherently wrong but does require careful consideration.	- Complainant - Disclosing person - A person who came forward - Survivor
'Walk-in', 'walk-in hours'	'Walk-in' assumes that everyone arrives on foot and that everyone is able to walk.	- Open access - Public - Freely accessible - Open consultation hours - Drop-in hours

Western	'Western' positions Europe as the norm, with 'non-Western' as a vague counterpart.	Name the specific country

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

3.7 Write inclusively

3.7.1 Gender

The term 'gender-neutral' is often used, but it is better to avoid it. Gender neutrality can make people who identify as (cis) women or men feel that it does not apply to them. It may also give the impression that we should all be less 'feminine' or 'masculine'. A better alternative is 'gender-inclusive' or 'gender-free'. These terms address a broader audience, both the norm and marginalised individuals.

Noun	Gender-inclusive alternative
Chairman	Chair
Husband, wife	Partner, spouse
Man (e.g. 'a three-man job'), guys /lads	People, persons, individuals, colleagues, students, interns, etc.
Mankind	Humanity
Manpower	Workforce, staffing, capacity, people power
Ombudsman Shortened form of Ombudsmandatoris. Gender has historically played no role in the term, but it appears masculine and can cause confusion.	Ombuds officer, ombudsperson, ombuds. The last term is preferred by the National Association of Ombuds for Education (Lvoo).
Secretary	Secretarial officer, administrative officer, management assistant
Father, mother	Parent, carer, guardian

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

3.7.2 Diminutives

In Dutch, diminutives are the addition –je at the end of a word, to indicate something being small. These add-ons are often used when referring to women, but not when referring to men. This unconsciously implies that we are making things seem smaller or less significant. The effect of this kind of language is that women are perceived as incompetent, inexpert, and hesitant, and may then present themselves accordingly.

In English, this is different, but it is still important to be aware of how language can subconsciously change when discussing different genders.

Avoid	Prefer
She's very passionate vs. He's driven and ambitious.	Talk about all genders the same way.
She helps out in the office vs. He manages office operations.	Talk about all genders the same way.
She's actually quite good at this.	She's great at this.

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

Tip: When in doubt, ask yourself: would I describe a cis man the same way? If not, reconsider the wording.

3.8 Use of pronouns

We use personal pronouns to refer to people, animals or things. English examples include: I/me/mine, you/your, he/him/his, she/her/his, we/us/ours and they/them/their.

If you want to know how best to address someone, you can ask: 'How would you like me to address you?' or 'Which pronouns do you use? (I use she/her or they/them myself.)'

Tip: Do you have a meeting with new colleagues or classmates? During the introductory round, make room to include everyone's pronouns, in addition to name and position. This way you avoid assumptions.

Please note: Avoid words such as 'want' or 'self-chosen' ('What are your self-chosen pronouns?'), as these may suggest that pronouns are optional. Promouns are an important part of someone's identity. Where relevant, the person will indicate how they should be addressed.

3.8.1 How do you use pronouns?

In English, there are several ways to refer to someone without specifying a gender, including person, individual, and the person concerned. If you do not know someone's gender and do not want to make assumptions, these are inclusive first choices.

English also has pronouns that do not indicate a specific gender:

- they/them
- their/theirs

Singular they/them is widely accepted and commonly used for an individual, regardless of gender. Everyone is different, so various combinations of pronouns are possible, such as she/they or he/they. If you are unsure, it is best to ask someone directly which pronouns they use.

Pronouns can be confusing and it also takes practice. People with specific pronouns generally understand that it takes some getting used to at first. The most important thing is that you do your best to respect the person in question.

Examples	Explanation
I will see them in tomorrow's lecture.	'They/them' is used as the gender-neutral singular pronoun.
I gave them my book.	'Them' is used as the indirect-object form.
Noah will also attend our meeting tomorrow and will prepare a presentation.	You can replace pronouns with that person's name.
The student expressed their opinion inclusively.	'Their' is the gender-neutral possessive form and makes no assumptions.
Jip has just got on their bicycle. I saw them in the office earlier.	An example of how to apply 'they/them' pronouns consistently for one person.
The student hands in the paper.	You can replace pronouns with a noun, such as 'the student'.
Charlie doesn't use pronouns. Last week I went to the cinema with Charlie. Charlie really liked the film.	Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all. In that case, use their name instead.

Are you missing an example? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

3.8.2 Can I still use she or he?

Binary pronouns such as he she can of course be used when they apply to someone. The main aim is to make language inclusive of non-binary people where relevant, for example in a job advert intended to signal explicitly that they are welcome.

In English, grammatical gender does not apply: nouns are not assigned a masculine or feminine form. This makes gender-inclusive language more straightforward than in Dutch. However, assumptions about gender still appear in English through word choice and convention. Common examples include:

- Default use of 'he' when gender is unknown
- Job titles such as chairman, fireman, or stewardess
- Terms such as mankind or manpower

The UvA uses inclusive English as its standard. This means making conscious choices. For example: using they/them for an unknown individual, choosing chair over chairman, or using humanity instead of mankind.

Please note: Avoid using the male form as the default. So, for example, 'the student' or 'the colleague', instead of automatically using 'he.'

Tip: Try reversing the usual order by putting 'woman' before 'man' in a list. For example, the Dutch vacancy notation 'Colleague wanted (x/f/m)'.



4. Glossaries

On the following pages you will find terms within the dimensions of gender, ableism and racism and a glossary of terms focused on diversity, inclusion and equality.

4.1 Gender and gender diversity

Concept	Meaning	Inclusive wording	Avoid
Cisgender, cis	Someone whose gender identity corresponds to their assigned sex at birth.	She is cisgender Cis woman, cis man	Biological male/ female Normal woman/man
Cis-heteronormativity	Abbreviation for cis-heteronormativity and refers to the idea that it is the norm to be cisgender and straight.	- The couple/couple - Partner	Unconsciously assuming a couple as husband and wife.
Gender	Gender is about the social constructions and norms and values that society assigns to being a woman or a man.	For someone with a gender fluid identity, gender changes.	Do not confuse gender with sex.
Gender diversity	The variety of gender identities and expressions. Gender diversity recognises that gender goes beyond the traditional binary of male or female and places gender on a spectrum.		
Gender expression	Expressing gender through (social) behaviour, for example through clothing and speech patterns. Gender expression ranges from feminine to androgynous to masculine.	David's gender expression today is androgynous.	Don't confuse expression with identity.

Gender identity	How someone interprets their own gender, such as woman, man, non-binary and genderqueer, or a combination of these.	Mustafa determines his own gender identity.	Don't confuse identity with expression.
Sex/sex characteristics	At birth, a person is assigned 'female' or 'male' on the basis of visible sex characteristics. In Dutch civil registration, some intersex people may be registered with an 'O' for undetermined or unknown.	Relevant when participating in medical research.	Do not confuse sex with gender.
Intersex	Intersex is an innate variation in gender characteristics, whereby someone is born with a body that does not fit the traditional medical standards of a male or female body. It is a form of natural diversity, just like hair colour, length, etc.	- Jamie is intersex - An intersex person - They are intersex	- Hermaphrodite - Ambiguous sex - Disorder of sex development
LGBTQIA+	Umbrella initialism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual people, plus all other identities included in the rainbow community.	The LGBTQIA+ community is celebrating Pride this month.	LGB This abbreviation is often used to deliberately exclude trans people and others. Not a synonym for Queer

Non-binary	Gender identities other than binary 'woman' or 'man'. There is a lot of variation in non-binary identities, such as fluid, not fixed, not normative and intermediate.	It is non-binary	
Queer	An umbrella term for people who do not feel at home in traditional boxes regarding gender identity and/or sexuality.	- Suzy is queer - The queer community	Not a synonym for LGBTQIA+
Sexism	Discrimination, inequality and exclusion based on sex and gender.		
Transphobia	Discrimination, inequality and exclusion based on someone's transness.		
Transgender, trans	Someone who identifies with a gender other than that assigned at birth. To be used as an adjective.	A trans man/trans woman He is transgender	The transgender
Transition	The social and/or medical process that a trans person goes through to become he gender that matches their identity.	She went into transition Before his transition... When she still presented herself as a boy... At birth he was seen as a girl.	She has changed gender Sex change He has been converted Before she became a girl When 'he' was a 'girl'

Are you missing a concept? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

4.1.1 Trans and non-binary: not interchangeable

There are regular conversations within the LGBTQIA+ community about whether all non-binary people are automatically trans. Being transgender means that someone does not identify with the gender assigned at birth. That is why the word transgender is seen by some as an umbrella term for anyone who is not cis, including non-binary people. At the same time, not all non-binary people are comfortable with that. This emphasises the importance of talking to the people you are talking about and what their preferences are.

4.2 Ableism and accessibility

Concept	Meaning	Inclusive wording	Avoid
Ableism	Discrimination, inequality and exclusion based on disability, chronic illness or neurodivergence.	Ableism is a mechanism of exclusion.	
Accessibility	Accessibility is about removing physical, digital and systemic barriers so that people have equal opportunities.	The UvA wants its buildings to be easily accessible to everyone.	
High sensitivity/ sensory sensitivities/ highly sensitive person (HSP)	High sensitivity means that someone is more sensitive to stimuli, such as sound, light or emotions. This can cause strong reactions to situations.	Michaela is a HSP. Ibrahim has sensory sensitivities to noise and bright light.	Oversensitive
Neurodivergence	Term for how human brains can deviate from the norm (neurotypical). Examples are: autism, ADHD, dyslexia, giftedness, dyscalculia, high sensitivity, dysgraphia and dyspraxia.	Izzy is neurodivergent and has ADHD.	- Stupid - Lazy - Difficult - Etc.

Neurodiverse/ neurodiversity	Neurodiversity concerns all variations of neurotypes (typical and divergent) within a group.	We think it is important that attention is paid to neurodiversity.	- Weird - Difficult
Neurotypical	Collective term for brains that belong to the norm.	The world is designed for neurotypical brains.	- Normal - Just

Are you missing a concept? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

4.2.1 Disability, ilness and support needs

What words are we talking about:

- Disability
- Chronic illness/condition
- Impairment
- Support needs

These words are often used interchangeably. All words have pros and cons, and all have elaborate arguments. This is an excellent example of language that is still developing and about which no clear agreement has yet been found. Therefore, consciously choose which word you want to use in which situation. The choice is always context-related.

Please note: the word 'handicap' has a different context in English than in Dutch. In English, there is a stronger negative understanding of the word, which comes from 'cap in hand', referring to begging in the streets.
This is not the case in Dutch. Dutch disability communities often use the word 'handicap' themselves in Dutch context. We recommend not using the word in English, and to use it consciouly in Dutch.

Tip: Be as complete as possible when there is room for it: 'people with a disability, illness or chronic condition'.

Please note: Not all chronic conditions are limiting people, but they can carry a social stigma.

Please note: At the UvA we often talk about people with a disability or need for support. This may involve extra time during an exam due to ADHD.

Please note: There are also people who provide informal care. They do not have a disability, but they may have an additional need for support.

4.2.2 The social model vs. the medical model

The medical model views a disability as a 'problem' or 'defect' in the individual that must be treated or cured in order to conform to the social norm. The social model, on the other hand, states that a disability arises from an inaccessible society, causing the focus to shift from 'repair' to inclusion, accessibility and the removal of social barriers.

Disabled people, people with a chronic illness, or people who are neurodivergent often use the social model when describing their situation. In this model, the person is not inherently limited; disability is experienced because society is inaccessible. The field of communication therefore tends to favour the social model.

4.3 Racism and ethnic diversity

Concept	Meaning	Inclusive wording	Avoid
Antisemitism	Discrimination, prejudice and hostility directed at Jewish people. This includes stereotypes, hate speech, violence and institutional exclusion. Antisemitism is a specific form of racism.		
Ethnicity	A (self-chosen) group identity, based on shared cultural values, traditions, language, history or nationality. This concerns everyone, both people outside the Netherlands and Dutch people themselves.	Ethnicity, ethnic background	Race, species
Institutional racism	This means that processes, policies and rules within an organisation, system or society lead to inequality based on origin, skin colour and religion.		

	Examples are: 'racial profiling', certain language expressions, and 'traditions' such as Zwarte Piet.		
Islamophobia	Discrimination, prejudice and hostility directed at Muslims or people perceived to be Muslim. Often based on stereotypes about Islam as a religion or culture.		
Marginalisation	People who face racism, discrimination or other forms of exclusion are marginalised. It is important to clearly identify this mechanism so that the responsibility for the solution lies with the system and not with the individual.	Ahmed belongs to a marginalised group. Sarah is disadvantaged because she cannot enter the building with her wheelchair.	Distance to the labour market Minority group
Migration background	A migration background means that someone, or one of their parents, was born abroad. **Note**: Use this word for anyone to whom this applies. Selection based on appearance is not sufficient (see racialization).	Niels has a migration background, his parents are from Sweden. The Meet your Mentor program is for students with a migration background.	- Allochtoon - Bicultural

Misogynoir	A specific form of discrimination, hatred and prejudice directed against black women. It is a combination of misogyny (misogyny) and the French word for black (noir).	Sylvana had to deal with misogynoir.	Sylvana faced sexism.
Person of mixed heritage/ with a mixed background	Someone with parents or ancestors from different ethnic or cultural groups, possibly more than two. This can lead to an identity that combines multiple cultures, traditions and perspectives. It emphasises diversity within one person. From a socio-cultural perspective, this is its own category (such as Dutch, Surinamese, etc.). People who belong to this category have unique context-related experiences in society, which are different from their (ancestor) parents without a mixed background.	Patrick is of mixed heritage: his mother is Dutch and his father is Hindustani Surinamese. Elif has a Turkish background. Megan is biracial.	Half-caste; half-blood Mixed race Origin Bicultural
Xenophobia	Hostility or prejudice towards people from other countries or cultures. Based on national or cultural origin rather than race or skin colour.		

Are you missing a concept? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.

4.3.1 Race, racism and racialisation

Racism and ethnic discrimination take many forms. They can be based on skin colour, ethnicity, religion, national origin or cultural background. Antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Romani discrimination are examples of racism that are not primarily based on skin colour, but are equally harmful and widespread.

The concept of **race** has been and continues to be used to portray certain groups as inferior, deny them rights, exploit them through slavery and deny their full humanity. Although race has no sound basis as a biological division of humanity, it is a social construct with tangible consequences in society.

The concept of race is the basis of the word **racism**: discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Racism is based on the idea that people can be divided into groups (races) with innate abilities, and that one race or group of people has better abilities than another. This is often about ethnic background or skin colour (EU, 2022).

The word race is complex, because humanity cannot be divided into discrete biological races. Yet many people are racialised on the basis of skin colour or heritage: others classify and treat them according to such characteristics, irrespective of how they identify themselves. **Racialisation** is a social and historical process that exposes power and inequality and can lead to discrimination and stereotyping.

Since the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, there has been a movement within the Black American community to reclaim the term race out of pride and shared militancy. Reclaiming words is a common method in social justice movements and can also be seen in words such as ‘queer’ and ‘fat.’



Understanding the word race as a social construct is therefore fundamental to recognising racism and the lived experiences and realities of people of colour. Ignoring or even denying race also means denying people their daily reality. That is why the word race is emphatically included in this language guide.

4.3.2 Ethnicity

Ethnicity is about shared cultural and historical characteristics, such as language, religion and origin. People with these common characteristics form an ethnic group.

Please note: you can use ethnicity when you want to mention someone's personal background. In English, the terms race and ethnicity are used more interchangably than in Dutch, but the words do not have the same meaning or historical context. Handle these words with care.

This is an incomplete document. With these subheadings we try to do justice to the sensitivity of the subject and the people who face exclusion based on ethnicity and race. Do you have any questions, comments or additions to this text? Contact diversity@uva.nl.

4.3.3 Dreamers, residence permit holders, international students and staff, and expatriates

The UvA is an international university and the Netherlands has attractive conditions for people to come to the Netherlands later in life: to study, work, or to find a safe home base. The UvA has a number of programmes for different target groups, so it is good to use the correct terms.

Group	Meaning
Asylum seeker	A person who seeks protection out of fear of persecution, violence or human rights violations. This word is often used in a negative sense. (Australian Red Cross, 2026)
Dreamer	In this Dutch context, a dreamer is a young person without a residence permit who grew up in the Netherlands and dreams of a better future. Despite barriers such as limited access to education, dreamers continue to pursue personal and academic development. The name refers to their hope for a life like that of peers who have legal documentation.
Emigrant	An emigrant is someone who leaves his own country to live in another country. This can be for various reasons, such as work, family or a better future. The country of departure is central to this term.
Expat/Expatriate	An expat is someone who temporarily lives in a country other than where he or she was born. This happens because of work, usually through an employment contract for a certain period of time. Expats often return to their native country after their stay.

Immigrant	An immigrant is someone who moves to a new country to live there. This country will become the new usual place of residence. People often immigrate for reasons such as work, family, safety or better opportunities. The country of arrival is central to this term.
International student/member of staff	In Dutch higher education, this term is often used to describe international students or employees. In English-speaking countries the word is less often used as a noun.
Migrant	A migrant is someone who moves to another country or area, temporarily or permanently. This can be for various reasons, such as work, study, war or family reunification. The word includes groups such as migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers and international students.
Residence permit holder (statushouder)	In Dutch usage, an asylum seeker becomes a 'statushouder' once they are granted a residence permit.
Refugee	A person who has applied for protection and has been granted refugee status. They may have been resettled in another country or are awaiting resettlement. (Australian Red Cross, 2026)

4.4 Other terms in the field of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Concept	Meaning
Classism	Discrimination, inequality and exclusion based on class such as poor vs. rich or theoretical vs. practically trained.
Decolonisation	The process by which a country or territory becomes independent from a colonizer. In education and research it means critically assessing and changing knowledge, methods and structures that arise from colonial ideas. It's about making space for diverse perspectives, voices and stories, and recognising the inequality and power created by colonialism.
DIG/ DEI/ EDI	DIG is the Dutch abbreviation for diversiteit, inclusie en gelijkwaardigheid. DEI/EDI is the English abbreviation for diversity, equity and inclusion.
Discrimination	Discrimination is the unequal treatment, disadvantage or exclusion of people based on personal characteristics. Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution makes discrimination on, among other things, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, political opinion and disability a punishable offense.

Diversity	Diversity concerns differences between people, including gender, age, skin colour, religious and/or cultural background, sexual orientation, physical and/or mental disability, and socio-economic status. It includes both visible and invisible identity characteristics. Diversity is a fact: we are all different from one another.
Equality vs equity	Equal treatment provides everyone with the same resources regardless of their circumstances. Equity does not mean treating everyone identically; it means responding to different needs to make equal opportunities and outcomes possible.
First generation	Often used with first generation students: students who are the first in their family to go to college.
Inclusion	Inclusion means that everyone, regardless of background or current situation, naturally belongs and participates, thinks along, makes decisions, etc.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality is about the fact that people usually belong to multiple social categories (race, socio-economic status, sexuality, gender, having a disability, religion, age, etc.). Depending on the combination of these categories, a person can experience exclusion or privilege. This lens helps to reveal the positionality of people in society and thus combat (unconscious) prejudices.
Inequality of opportunity	Inequality of opportunity means that not everyone enjoys the same opportunities. This term is often used in relation to education. There is inequality of opportunity when students with the same talents do not achieve the same results or have the same opportunities within education due to their specific background.
(Historically) Marginalised groups/identities	Marginalised groups are (groups of) people who do not belong to the norm or average. This happens due to structural and historical disadvantage, as a result of which these groups become and remain underrepresented in areas such as research, politics, media, in the workplace and in language. People who belong to marginalised groups include people of colour, queer people, non-Christian people and women.
Norm group	The norm group is the group that is consciously or unconsciously used as a starting point or average. The norm group is often the majority group. Characteristics that deviate from the norm group are seen as different and often do not fit into the (unwritten) norm.

Othering	Othering is a verb based on the English word 'other', which means 'other' or 'the other'. The verb othering literally means making someone 'the other': defining and securing one's own identity and position by distancing oneself from an 'other', often on the basis of a group characteristic. With othering, this 'other' is negatively portrayed as different and strange, versus a positive image of one's own person or group.
Positionality	Positionality refers to a person's specific worldview, such as personal beliefs, socio-economic status and cultural background. These things may influence how someone makes choices. Self-reflection is a requirement in positionality because it forces us to examine conscious and unconscious biases. Explicit and implicit power dynamics can also play a role in personal and professional choices. Transparency about your own positionality increases inclusion in the workplace, in the classroom, in research and in education.
Power	Power is about the (visible and invisible) degree of influence you do or do not have: in the workplace, as a teacher, in social debate, or in the media. The more you meet the standard, the more privileges you automatically have and the more opportunities to exercise power you have. Power can be formal (hierarchical), but also informal (social).
Psychological safety	Psychological safety is the shared belief in a group that the environment is safe for risk taking. You feel free to express yourself, share ideas, ask questions, admit mistakes, and provide respectful feedback because you know they are valued and you are respected for your contributions. You have no fear of negative consequences such as rejection, humiliation or punishment.
Privilege	Privilege refers to unearned benefits, opportunities, or treatments that a person receives as a result of their identity, background, or social status. Privileges often come automatically if you belong to a norm group. Having privileges does not mean that one cannot experience challenges, difficulties or setbacks. However, it does mean that certain people enjoy advantages that others have less, simply because of their identity or background.
Social safety	Social safety is the extent to which people feel protected against - and are actually protected from - transgressive behaviour by others, such as bullying, discrimination, aggression and sexual intimidation. This is an environment with mutual respect, trust and an open culture, essential for a healthy working and learning environment.
Stereotype	By a stereotype we mean a fixed, exaggerated image of a specific person or group, which often does not (or only partly) corresponds to reality. Stereotypes can ultimately lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Prejudices	Prejudices are emotional reactions towards an individual from a certain group based on assumed group characteristics. These are often negative feelings.

Are you missing a concept? Let us know via diversity@uva.nl.



5. Resources, reference works and sources

This language guide was created partly because many other parties have already done work in the field of inclusive language. Below you will find an (incomplete) list of resources to expand your knowledge or zoom in on specific themes.

5.1 B1 language use

- https://hemingwayapp.com/
- https://englishprofile.org/?menu=evp-online

5.2 Inclusive language guides

- Gender workbook from Transgender Network Netherlands: https://www.transgendernetwerk.nl/kennis/publicatie/het-genderdoeboek-wegwijzer-voor-organisaties/
- Inclusive Language Guide from Maastricht University: https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/diversity-inclusivity/inclusive-language
- Incomplete Style Guide from WOMEN Inc.: https://www.womeninc.nl/kennis/alles-over-inclusieve-taal/
- Regenboogtaaltips from Movisie: https://www.movisie.nl/sites/movisie.nl/files/2020-07/regenboogtaaltips_03.pdf
- Language guide University of Groningen: https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/policy-and-strategy/diversity-and-inclusion/diversiteit-en-inclusie-voor-jou/inclusive-language-style-guide
- Language and gender from Language Union: https://taaladvies.net/taal-en-gender-algemeen/
- Inclusive communication language tips from the Municipality of Amsterdam: https://www.amsterdam.nl/sociaaldomein/diversiteit/eerste-hulp-discriminatiebestrijding/tools-inclusiviteit-organisatie/taaltips-inclusieve-communicatie/
- Toolbox from Student Pride NL: https://www.scienceguide.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Toolbox-definitief-22-05-2021.pdf
- Toolbox from Utrecht University: https://uu-inclusive-teaching-toolbox.sites.uu.nl/nl/
- Trans-inclusive communication from OneWorld: https://www.oneworld.nl/identiteit/zo-spreek-je-transgender-personen-op-de-juiste-manier-aan/
- Van Dale about gender-neutral pronouns: https://www.vandale.nl/blogs/taaladvies/genderneutraal-persoonlijk-voornaamwoord
- Words Matter from Wereldmuseum Amsterdam: https://amsterdam.wereldmuseum.nl/nl/over-wereldmuseum-amsterdam/onderzoek/words-matter-publicatie

5.3 Inclusive image guides

- Image bank with a focus on disabilities and diversity: https://disabilityin.org/resource/corporate-disability-stock-photography
- Image bank with a focus on disabilities and diversity: https://www.creativeconnector.art/disabled-here/
- Image bank with a focus on cultural diversity: https://tonl.co/
- Image bank with a focus on gender diversity: https://genderspectrum.vice.com/
- Guide to consciously dealing with images of fat people: https://dikkevinger.org/wat-doen-we/actie/dik-in-de-media/

5.4 Other reference works

- Teachers can contact the TLC for tips: https://tlc.uva.nl/article/de-waarden-van-woorden-inclusief-taalgebruik/
- ECIO has developed a Toolbox Inclusive Teaching for teachers: https://publicaties.ecio.nl/inclusie-in-het-onderwijs-inspirerende-concepten/toolbox-inclusive-teaching
- https://www.accessibility.nl/
- https://codedi.nl/
- https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms
- https://komteenmensbijdedokter.nl/begrippenlijst/
- Knowledge base Included of Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences: https://www.hogeschoolrotterdam.nl/go/included/kennisartikelen/#flex

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