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EQUITY LANGUAGE GUIDE

Glossary of Terms



NATIONAL
RECREATION AND PARK
ASSOCIATION



Photo of rainbow bench by Jose Maria Ruiz via Dreamstime.

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About This Guide

The words we use matter — language has the power to uplift as well as marginalize. From the time we start learning how to communicate, we unconsciously take in the implicit biases in our language. We may not realize certain words, and how we use them, can be damaging to others. With so many ways to convey a single thought, finding the “right” word can be difficult.

With the constant evolution of language, personal preferences and changing contexts, the “right” word rarely exists. However, understanding which words may be more appropriate than others in certain situations can reinforce our values of diversity, equity and inclusion while inviting others into our work. Most importantly, when we make thoughtful word choices, we can be part of creating a more inclusive environment.

As the creators of community, park and recreation professionals can especially benefit from using language that is inclusive and welcoming for all people. This guide can help those in the field of parks and recreation use consistent and appropriate terms related to diversity, equity, inclusion, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability and more.

Developed by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), this guide includes content from leading language guides, as well as resources from multiple organizations, associations, researchers and more. It is meant to reflect terminology most applicable to parks and recreation and related professions; however, it is not an all-encompassing equity glossary. Additional resources are listed at the end of each definition, as well as at the end of this guide.

NRPA hopes this guide will inspire more inclusive communication throughout the park and recreation profession — helping create communities where everyone feels welcome to participate fully as their true selves.

How to Use This Guide

- Words are capitalized or not based on how they should be used. If capitalization varies, an explanation has been given for which one to use.
- Read descriptions and usage carefully. Using one word in a certain situation may not make sense in another situation, even if they seem similar.
- In all instances when dealing with someone’s race, identity and culture, it is **imperative that you ask how people prefer to be identified**.
- When citing research reports or legal cases that use different terms than those suggested here, you may use the original language, in quotes, for clarity. If you need to reference the same idea or term outside of quotes, use the language suggested in this guide. If possible, include a note about why a different term is being used — it may even be a teaching opportunity.



Park and recreation professionals take part in an activity during a 2019 community engagement workshop hosted by NRPA.

General Writing Advice

- Be as specific as possible. Always use a more specific term, if possible. If you find yourself relying on generalizations, do some research into the groups of people, topics or locations you are writing about. This [Vox article](#) provides a good background.
- Use people-first language. For example, say “person with a disability” instead of “disabled person.”
- Use active voice when writing (versus passive voice). You can typically identify the use of passive voice by looking for “to be” verbs (is, was, are, etc.). Active voice places the emphasis on the person doing the action. [Learn more here](#).
- In most cases, write with a sixth- to eighth-grade reading level in mind to ensure clarity in your message. Simple words and phrases usually create a stronger message than long-winded sentences and phrases. Avoid jargon. The [Hemingway App](#) is a useful tool to simplify your writing.
- Keep in mind that terminology can change frequently. One major news event can change the meaning of a previously innocuous word. Please refer to the cover of this document to see when it was last updated. The most recent version can be found at nrpa.org/equity. If you have a suggested update, please email customerservice@nrpa.org.
- Remember, “progress not perfection.” Sometimes, you will get it wrong or forget and that’s OK. Take a moment, acknowledge it, and commit to doing better next time. Change is a process, and it is important that we hold each other accountable in a supportive way.

Glossary of Terms

Listed in alphabetical order within the categories.

[diversity, equity and inclusion](#)

accessibility/accessible: Capable of being used or accessed. Often when we talk about accessibility in parks and recreation, we mean that something is, at its basic level, legally accessible to people. Accessibility of playgrounds and facilities, for example, is often determined by Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. Accessible is not the same as inclusive. Accessibility of spaces is an important first step and is often followed by looking at how to make those space more equitable and inclusive. ([NRPA](#))

ally: Someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and works in solidarity with oppressed groups to elevate these other voices above their own in the struggle for justice. ([Washington Environmental Council](#))

anti-racism: The work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic and social life. Anti-racism tends to be an individualized approach, established in opposition to individual racist behaviors and impacts. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

citizens/Americans: **Use caution with this word.** When we talk about parks and recreation serving communities, we are usually talking about how they serve all people whether or not they are a U.S. citizen. Referring to “residents” or “members” of a community is a more inclusive approach. Likewise, avoid using the term “Americans” generically for a group (because it limits the group to those who have citizenship status as Americans). ([Sierra Club](#))

community engagement: The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs and practices. ([The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \[CDC\]](#), [NRPA](#))

cultural humility: A lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique where we not only learn about another’s culture, but also start with an examination of our own beliefs and cultural identities. It is the ability to be open to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to another person. “Cultural humility” is distinct from “cultural competency” and “reflexivity.” (National Institute of Health, [Hogg Foundation](#), [American Psychological Association \[APA\]](#))

disparities: The quantity that separates a group from a reference point on a particular measure of health, access or other measure that is expressed in terms of a rate, proportion, mean or some other quantitative measure. ([CDC](#))

diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI): DEI is NRPA’s preferred abbreviation for work that includes diversity, equity and inclusion. Use over JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion) and other abbreviations or acronyms. Spell out on first reference when needed for explanation. ([NRPA](#))

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diversity: Differences in racial and ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic and academic/professional backgrounds; people with different opinions, backgrounds (degrees and social experience), religious beliefs, political beliefs, sexual orientations, heritage, mental or physical ability, learning style, gender identity and life experience. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

dominant culture: Organizational culture that is heavily influenced by the leadership, management and organizational development as defined by white men and women. Dominant cultures do not embrace diversity of any kind beyond representation, and they promote assimilation over integration. ([Equity in the Center](#))

dominant vs. non-dominant groups: A dominant group is a group with power, privileges and social status; a social group that controls the value system and rewards in a particular society. A non-dominant group (sometimes called minority or oppressed group) is typically defined by the dominant group. It is a category of people whose physical appearance or cultural characteristics are defined as being different from the traits of the dominant group and that result in their being set apart for different and unequal treatment. ([Social Science LibreTexts](#), [Inclusion Solution](#))

environmental justice: The fair and equitable involvement of — and outcomes for — all people in environmental policies, practices, attitudes and actions. Due in large part to the environmental movement being historically white-led, there have been unequal benefits of environmental protection with most benefits experienced by white communities. This has led to a present-day landscape of environmental injustice where communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-income communities bear the most burden of pollution and environmental degradation. Communities of color and tribal nations often lead environmental justice work, while historically white-led organizations have an important role to play. ([Washington Environmental Council](#), [Environmental Protection Agency \[EPA\]](#))

equality: Ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents. Health equality refers to allocating resources equally among beneficiaries. Equality = Same. ([The Equality and Human Rights Commission](#))

equity: The absence of avoidable, unfair or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically or geographically, or by other means of stratification. Equity = Fairness and Justice. ([The World Health Organization \[WHO\]](#))

health equity: Fair and just opportunities afforded to everyone, so that all people can attain their highest level of health; valuing everyone equally with sustained efforts and resources heavily focused on addressing unjust, unfair and avoidable historical, social and political injustices, and eliminating health disparities. Allocating resources on the basis of need. ([The Root Cause Coalition](#), [NRPA](#))

health inequity: Systematic differences in health status or the distribution of health resources between different populations arising from the social conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. They are unfair and avoidable and have significant social and economic costs to both individuals and societies. ([WHO](#))

historically marginalized, marginalized: Being treated as insignificant or peripheral. **Avoid this term in general when describing people** because it can come across as condescending and have negative connotations when used in a broad way. However, it may be necessary and appropriate in context. If you do use it, avoid “the marginalized,” and don’t use marginalized as an adjective. Don’t say “marginalized people” or “marginalized populations.” Other terms that may work instead, if accurate in context:

- Specific terms for the makeup of the communities discussed, and how they are marginalized
- Partial listings if some populations are known, with language showing how the groups were marginalized (Hispanic, Black and other people in the neighborhood)
- Underrepresented groups or underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (if race or ethnicity applies)
- Disenfranchised
- Excluded or historically excluded people ([American Heart Association](#))

holidays: (*see also, religion*) When writing about holidays, remember to consider and include those outside the Christian-majority holidays that typically dominate in the United States. Be cautious about messaging around Columbus Day, which NRPA does not celebrate because of its association with and connection to the genocide of Native peoples. Thanksgiving can be a helpful hook to obtain press coverage, however, be careful not to promote inaccurate cultural narratives about “the first Thanksgiving.” The tradition of giving thanks for a successful harvest dates back millennia and is shared across many cultural traditions — focusing on themes of harvest and gratitude can help to avoid the violent associations that many people have with Thanksgiving. ([Sierra Club](#))

implicit bias: The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control and are not accessible through introspection. ([Kirwan Institute](#))

inclusion: Authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into the processes, activities and decisions/policymaking in a way that shares power, recognizes and celebrates differences, ensures people feel welcome, and makes sure everyone has equitable access to opportunities. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

Inclusion means removing barriers, both physical and theoretical, so that all people have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of parks and recreation. ([NRPA](#))

immigrants: Never use the term “illegal” to describe a person. If a person lacks legal permission to live or work in the United States, you can refer to them as an “undocumented” immigrant or someone with a complex immigration status. ([Sierra Club](#))

inequities: A difference in the distribution or allocation of a resource between groups. ([CDC](#))

native/invasive/alien plants: When we take terms that are often, or have been historically, used to describe people and extend those terms to plants and other non-human things, we can inadvertently minimize the meaning these terms have for people. When we talk about native versus invasive plant species, we often assume one is better than another, which is not always true. Instead of using the terms native and invasive, we can use other terms — introduced, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, long-established, weeds, etc. — that better describe a plant’s relationship with its environment. ([Smithsonian Magazine](#), [Meridians](#))

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oppression: When an agent group, whether knowingly or unknowingly, abuses a target group. This pervasive system is rooted historically and maintained through individual and institutional/systematic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry and social prejudice, resulting in a condition of privilege for the agent group at the expense of the target group. ([The National Conference for Community and Justice](#))

park access: The just and fair quantity, proximity and connections to quality parks and green spaces, recreation facilities, as well as programs that are safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone. When people have just and fair access, our health and social well-being improve, and our communities can protect and better recover from environmental, social and economic challenges. ([NRPA](#))

privilege: Unearned access to resources (social power) that are only readily available to some people because of their social group membership; an advantage or immunity granted to or enjoyed by one societal group above and beyond the common advantage of all other groups. Privilege is often invisible to those who have it but, nevertheless, puts them at an advantage over those who don't have it. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

racism, racist: Racism is racial prejudice — an unjustifiable, and usually negative, attitude based on someone's race — plus the power to carry out discrimination through social and institutional power. Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.

A racist is someone who supports racist policy through their actions and interactions or through expressing a racist idea.

In writing, avoid using terms like “racially charged” or “racially motivated.” Instead, be specific about the type of discrimination. If the term racist/racism is appropriate, use it. Don't try to gloss it over. ([Racial Equity Tools](#), [Dismantling Racism](#), [Ibram X. Kendi](#))

racial equity: Providing everyone what they need to be successful by taking race and the impacts of racism into account. This is distinct from racial equality, which is treating everyone the same. Racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if someone's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how they fare. When we use the term, we are thinking about racial equity as one part of racial justice, so it also includes work to address root causes of inequities, not just their manifestation. This includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or that fail to eliminate them. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

racial justice: The work to uproot historically racist systems and replace them with fair, just and equitable policies and practices. The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. It goes beyond “anti-racism.” It is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures. ([Washington Environmental Council](#), [RacialEquity.org](#))

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religion: Religion can be an important factor to someone’s identity and culture. Like many other facets of our identities, someone’s religion should only be mentioned if relevant to the story. One way to demonstrate respect for cultures other than one’s own is to recognize religious and cultural traditions other than those that typically dominate the U.S. media landscape (usually Christian holidays). It’s a good idea to check calendars for major holidays and observances you may be unaware of. When writing about seasonal events, either avoid writing about a specific holiday (i.e., the Christmas season) or be inclusive of the many holidays happening at certain times during the year. ([Sierra Club](#))

social justice: A concept in which equity or justice is achieved in every aspect of society rather than some aspects or for some people. A world organized around social justice principles affords individuals and groups fair treatment and a fair share or distribution of society’s advantages and disadvantages. ([University of Tennessee, Knoxville](#), [National Education Association \[NEA\]](#))

social power (also known as power): Access to resources that enhance someone’s chance of getting what they need, in order to lead a comfortable, productive and safe life. ([The National Conference for Community and Justice](#))

structural racism: The normalization of many systems and dynamics that routinely advantage whites while producing inequities among racial and ethnic groups and cumulative, chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. Structural racism encompasses the entire system of white domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society — including its history, culture, politics and economics. It involves reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

white supremacy: The ideology that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs and actions of white people are superior to people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs and actions. While most people associate white supremacy with extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, white supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, inhuman and “undeserving.” Drawing from critical race theory, the term “white supremacy” also refers to a political or socioeconomic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not — both at a collective and an individual level. ([Racial Equity Tools](#))

under-invested: Refers to the fact that neighborhoods, schools, institutions and communities have been historically excluded from equitable distribution of resources. This term, or a variation, can help ensure we are not using language that places blame on communities or populations. ([American Heart Association](#)) Examples:

- These neighborhoods are struggling with access to healthy food because of under-investment.
- Because of a lack of investment, access to healthy foods is a problem.

underrepresented: Often an effective term when discussing communities and populations. As always, specificity and context guide the best usage, but this term often works well when discussing less-specific groups. Make sure there truly is underrepresentation when using, and when possible, say specifically how people are underrepresented. ([American Heart Association](#)) Examples:

- Black and Hispanic people are underrepresented in the field of parks and recreation.
- Underrepresented racial and ethnic groups were considered in these statistics.

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under-resourced: This refers to communities lacking in income, employment opportunities, educational opportunities, access to care, access to healthy foods, access to safe places to exercise and other resources. **Use only in a literal sense:** When an area lacks resources, be specific about what is lacking. Exercise caution and carefully consider context; some usages can inaccurately imply race or ethnicity. ([American Heart Association](#)) Example:

- The community is under-resourced in terms of quality healthcare.

underserved: **Exercise caution with this word.** It can have negative connotations, as if people need to be served to succeed. It can, sometimes, support the negative “savior” idea. Under-resourced is usually a better option. However, underserved may be a necessary and appropriate term in context, often when used specifically. ([American Heart Association](#))

Example: The community is medically underserved.

vulnerable: Susceptible to physical or emotional harm, often in need of help or special care or treatment. **Exercise caution with this term** because it can imply some people need someone to save them. However, this term may be necessary and appropriate in context. ([American Heart Association](#)) Other terms that may work instead (if accurate in context):

- Specific terms for the communities discussed, such as Iraqi or Chilean (ideal)
- Partial listings if some populations are known, with language showing how the groups are vulnerable (Hispanic and Black people, and other people of color)
- Underrepresented groups or underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (whichever is correct)
- Disenfranchised
- Excluded or historically excluded people

Examples:

- Acceptable: After the surgery, she felt emotionally vulnerable.*
- **Not acceptable: People in the Lebanese neighborhood are vulnerable.**
* *In context, it can work with economic and social vulnerabilities as well.*

Example:

- Historical redlining leaves members of Black communities vulnerable to housing insecurity.

race and ethnicity

American Indians, Native Americans, Native: All of these terms are acceptable. The consensus, however, is that whenever possible, Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name. In the United States, Native American has been widely used but is falling out of favor with some groups, and the terms American Indian or Indigenous American are preferred by many Native people. ([National Museum of the American Indian](#))

First Nation is the preferred term for native tribes in Canada.

Indian is used to describe the peoples and cultures of the South Asian nation of India. It should not be used as a replacement for American Indians.

Indigenous is an adjective and refers to the original inhabitants of a place and is not specific to the United States. **Indigenous people** is another term that can be used to describe the original inhabitants of a place.

Native nation is a preferred term over Tribe. Native nations are independent nations within a nation. The term nation shows respect for sovereignty and the fact that Native nations each have their own systems of government. Globally, we have trivialized the term Tribe (think “bride tribe,” “political tribalism,” etc.). We don’t recommend using Tribe or Tribes to talk about Native nations. Some phrases or even names of Native nations contain the word Tribe or a derivative (Tribal colleges, for example). It’s OK to use Tribe in these cases. ([Native Governance Center](#))

Asian American: Asian American is the proper term for people who come from Asia or descend from people who lived in Asia. Do not hyphenate. When possible, ask people how they identify (Asian American or Chinese American, Japanese American, etc.). ([The Diversity Style Guide](#))

AAP: AAP is an acronym for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. **Avoid using the acronym and do not use it as a blanket term when a more specific one is available.** It is OK to spell out when relevant. It is OK to use in direct quotes and in reference to organizations, such as Stop AAP Hate.

Example: The COVID-19 pandemic caused an increase in hate incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The organization Stop AAP Hate is a great advocacy resource. ([Stop AAP Hate](#))

biracial, multiracial: Biracial is normally used for someone who has parents from two different races. While multiracial is used when someone has parents from two or more races — such as a child having a half-Colombian, half-Trinidadian mother, and a father who is German, Nigerian and Korean. The terms biracial and multiracial should only be used if it is relevant to what is being written and if someone self-identifies as such. ([Anti-Racism Daily](#))

If cultural background is needed, be specific about heritage. Example:

- She has a Black mother and a Guatemalan father.

These terms are usually better suited for describing large, diverse groups of people than individuals. Example:

- In a research report, biracial women shared how they prefer to be identified.

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Black, African American: The capitalized term Black is a recognition of how language evolves over time. The term reflects a shared identity and culture rather than a descriptor of skin color. African American (no hyphen) is a term used for people who share a lineage that can be traced directly or indirectly to Africa. African American is not necessarily interchangeable with Black. For example, people who live in America of Caribbean heritage may prefer Caribbean American. Always follow a person's preference.

Black can be used as an adjective in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense: Black people, Black culture, Black literature, Black studies, Black colleges. ([Diversity Style Guide](#))

Black should not be used as a singular noun.

The term "white" should be lowercase.

brown: **Avoid this term** as a racial, ethnic or cultural descriptor unless it is part of direct quote or how someone prefers to be identified.

dual heritage: When noting someone with dual heritage, a hyphen is not needed. Always follow a person's preference.

Example: African American, Mexican American, Turkish German

Hispanic and Latino: In all instances when referring to persons from primarily Spanish-speaking cultures, be as specific as possible. Always ask how someone prefers to be identified, which could include multiple identifications such as "Latina and Mexican American." If a broader term is absolutely necessary, use "*Hispanic and Latino*." For example, "The grant will be focused on identifying play deserts in primarily *Hispanic and Latino* neighborhoods." See examples below for specific definitions.

Chicano: A term that Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest sometimes use to describe their heritage. Use only if it is a person's preference.

Hispanic: An umbrella term referring to a person whose ethnic origin is in a Spanish-speaking country, as well as those living in the United States with Latin American ancestry, except for those from Brazil, which is not a Spanish-speaking country. ([Diversity Style Guide](#))

Latino, Latina: Umbrella terms referring to those living in the United States with Latin American ancestry. Latina is the feminine form of Latino. Latino is the masculine form. ([Diversity Style Guide](#))

Latine: a gender-neutral form of Latino/Latina, currently more popular in locations outside the United States. Benefits of "Latine" include that it is easier to pronounce in Spanish and can be applied to other gendered terms in Spanish (i.e., "elle" instead of "ella" or "el"). Use if it is a person's preference. ([Washington Post](#))

Latinx: a gender-neutral term form of Latino/Latina which is more popular in California. Some people from Hispanic and Latino cultures have not adopted it for several reasons, one including that it is hard to pronounce in Spanish. Use if it is a person's preference. ([Washington Post](#))

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Indigenous land acknowledgment: A land acknowledgment is a formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous people as traditional stewards of this land and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous people and their traditional territories. It is important to understand the history that has brought you to reside on the land, and to seek to understand your place within that history. Land acknowledgements do not exist in a past tense, or historical context: colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation. ([Northwestern University, Native Governance Center](#))

minority, racial minority: **Avoid using this term** and instead opt for specificity. Be specific whenever possible. It is OK to use in a direct quote or as part of the name of an organization or group.

Example: The National Recreation and Park Ethnic Minority Society is an affiliate of NRPA.

people of color: **Use caution with this term.** It can be acceptable in broad references to multiple races other than white. Be aware, however, that many people object to the term for various reasons, including that it lumps together anyone who isn't white into one monolithic group. As always, be as specific as possible. Other terms may be more appropriate, such as:

- People from various racial and ethnic backgrounds
- Diverse groups
- Different cultures

Avoid using the term Black, Indigenous and people of color, which some see as more inclusive by distinguishing the experiences of Black and Indigenous people, but others see as less inclusive by diminishing the experiences of everyone else. **Do not use the shorthand POC or BIPOC** unless necessary in a direct quotation.

Do not use person of color to describe an individual. ([Vox](#))

[gender and sexual orientation](#)

ally (LGBTQ+): “Ally” is a term used to describe someone who is actively supportive of LGBTQ+ people. It encompasses straight and cisgender “allies,” as well as those within the LGBTQ+ community who support each other (e.g., a lesbian who is an “ally” to the bisexual community). (Human Rights Campaign [[HRC](#)])

cisgender: A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. ([HRC](#))

gender expression: External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine. ([HRC](#))

gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither — how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth. ([HRC](#))

LGBTQ+: An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.” The acronym is acceptable to use on its own without spelling out on first instance. You also may see “LGBTQIA+” used, however, for the purposes of the NRPA Style Guide, we use LGBTQ+.

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non-binary: An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do. Non-binary also can be used as an umbrella term encompassing such identities as agender, bigender, genderqueer or gender-fluid. ([HRC](#))

pronouns: Always use a person’s preferred pronouns (they/she/he) and do not assume you know what someone’s preference may be. Initiate a conversation by saying something like, “My preferred pronouns are... How should I refer to you?” When writing hypothetically about people, **do not use “him/her.”** Instead, use “they/their/them” even for singular pronouns. ([MyPronouns.org](#))

Example: “When asking a child about their preferred playground equipment, also ask them what colors they prefer.”

queer: A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, such as those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but also has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ+ movement. ([HRC](#))

sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people. Note: An individual’s sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity. ([HRC](#))

transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. ([HRC](#))

age

ageism: Ageism is the stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age. Ageism can take many forms, including prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory practices, or institutional policies and practices that perpetuate stereotypical beliefs. ([WHO](#))

older adults: Preferred over senior citizens, seniors or elderly as a general term when appropriate and relevant. It is best used when referring to groups of people and not specific individuals. Always be specific when possible, using someone’s age instead of categorizing them as an older adult. Senior is acceptable in direct quotations and in names (e.g., senior center).

ability

ableism: Ableism is the discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require “fixing” and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as “less than,” and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions and generalizations of people with disabilities. ([Access Living](#))

ablest micro-aggressions: Micro-aggressions are everyday verbal or behavioral expressions that communicate a negative slight or insult in relation to someone's gender identity, race, sex, disability, etc. Phrases like this imply that a disability makes a person less than, and that disability is bad, negative or a problem to be fixed, rather than a normal, inevitable part of the human experience. ([Access Living](#))

Examples:

- "That's so lame."
- "You are so retarded."
- "That guy is crazy."
- "You're acting so bi-polar today."
- "Are you off your meds?"
- "It's like the blind leading the blind."
- "We need to be aware of our blind spots."
- "My ideas fell on deaf ears."
- "She's such a psycho."
- "I'm super OCD about how I clean my apartment."
- "Can I pray for you?"
- "I don't even think of you as disabled."

Blind/legally blind/visually impaired: Use "blind" only when the person has complete loss of sight and "legally blind" when the person has almost complete loss of sight. Other terms also may be acceptable. It is best to ask the person which term they prefer and take that into consideration. ([National Center on Disability and Journalism](#))

caregiver: "Caregiver" is preferable to "caretaker" when referring to the care of people. ([National Center on Disability and Journalism](#))

deaf/Deaf: Some people with mild or moderate hearing loss may affiliate themselves with the Deaf community and prefer to be referred to as "deaf" instead of "hard of hearing." Alternatively, some who are deaf and don't have a cultural affiliation to the Deaf community may prefer the term "hard of hearing." Lowercase when referring to a hearing-loss condition or to a deaf person who prefers lowercase. Capitalize for those who identify as members of the Deaf community or when they capitalize Deaf when describing themselves. "Deaf" should be used as an adjective, not as a noun; it describes a person with profound or complete hearing loss. ([National Center on Disability and Journalism](#))

disability: When describing an individual, **do not reference their disability** unless it is clearly pertinent to the story. If it is pertinent, it is best to use language that refers to the person first and the disability second. For example: “The writer, who has a disability” as opposed to “the disabled writer.” When possible, refer to a person’s specific condition. ([National Center on Disability and Journalism](#))

differently-abled: This term has been used as an alternative to “disabled,” “handicapped” or “mentally retarded.” Currently, **it is not considered appropriate**. Some consider it condescending, offensive or a way to avoid talking about disability. “Person with a disability” is a more neutral term than “differently-abled.”

Handicapped: **Avoid using “handicap” and “handicapped”** when describing a person. Instead, refer to the person’s specific condition or use “person with a disability.” The terms are still widely used and generally acceptable when citing laws, regulations, places or things, such as “handicapped parking,” although many prefer the term “accessible parking.” **Avoid “handicapable,”** as it will not be understood by many.

Wheelchair: It is acceptable to describe a person as “someone who uses a wheelchair,” followed by an explanation of why the equipment is required. **Avoid “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair-bound”** as these terms describe a person only in relationship to a piece of equipment. The terms also are misleading, as wheelchairs can liberate people, allowing them to move about, and they are inaccurate, as people who use wheelchairs are not permanently confined in them, but are transferred to sleep, sit in chairs, drive cars, etc. ([National Center on Disability and Journalism](#))

socioeconomic status

homeless: An individual who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. Some people prefer the term unhoused. When possible, ask which term people prefer. Use person-first language: people experiencing homelessness; **avoid “homeless people” or the “homeless”**. The term, “homeless shelter” may be used, although some prefer the term, “emergency shelter.” ([The Diversity Style Guide, End Homelessness](#))

low income/low-income: Low-income communities is an acceptable term, but it is important to note that “low income” or “low-income community” has historically served as an implicit descriptor for people of marginalized races and/or ethnicities. It is important to include racial and/or ethnic descriptions along with socioeconomic status when relevant. For example, “the grant will help park and recreation professionals reach low-income and middle-income Puerto Rican families.” ([APA](#))

poor: **Poor is not recommended**. Instead use people-first language, such as “people whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold” or “people whose self-reported income were in the lowest income bracket.” ([APA](#))

poverty: A level at which someone lacks income, resilience and access to resources and services. ([Washington Environmental Council](#))

Additional Guidance and Resources

The resources below may provide additional guidance on topic-specific terminology and usage. The links below may contain advice counter to what is provided above. In all cases, refer to the NRPA Equity Language Guide, but do use additional resources when looking for something more specific. If you have a question about usage, please reach out to NRPA's DEI and Communications teams.

[AARP](#)

[Access Living](#)

[American Heart Association](#)

American Psychological Association (APA)

- [Bias-Free Language](#)
- [Cultural Humility](#)

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)

[Diversity Style Guide](#)

[EPA – Environmental Justice](#)

[Equity in the Center](#)

[Grammarly](#)

[Hogg Foundation](#)

[Human Rights Campaign \(HRC\)](#)

[Kirwan Institute](#)

[Meridians](#)

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

- [Inclusive Language Guide and Links to Other Style Guides](#)

[National Center on Disability and Journalism](#)

[National Museum of the American Indian](#)

[Native Governance Center](#)

[Northwestern University](#)

[Racial Equity Tools](#)

[Reading Level Checker](#)

[Sierra Club](#)

[Smithsonian Magazine](#)

[The Equality and Human Rights Commission](#)

[The National Conference for Community and Justice](#)

[The Root Cause Coalition](#)

[Vox](#)

[Washington Environmental Council](#)

[Washington Post](#)

World Health Organization

- [Ageism](#)
- [Health Equity](#)