

**BMA**

**A guide to effective communication:  
inclusive language in the workplace**



British Medical Association  
bma.org.uk

## Why is language important?

We are committed to promoting equal rights and opportunities, supporting diversity, and creating an open and inclusive environment for our members, employees and stakeholders. The successful implementation of equality and inclusion in all aspects of our work will ensure that members, colleagues and staff are valued, motivated and treated fairly. It will allow us to respond appropriately and sensitively to an increasingly diverse society.

As an association, an important way that we can affirm our commitment to equality and inclusion is through the use of inclusive language. This guide promotes good practice through the use of language that shows respect for, and sensitivity towards everyone. The choice of appropriate words makes an important contribution towards the celebration of diversity. As well as avoiding offence, it is about treating each other with dignity and as equal members of an integrated community. Language is dynamic, and terms disappear, re-emerge and are revised. We all need to be sensitive to changing expressions and meanings as they emerge.

This guidance should be applied to all forms of communication, including conversations, committee papers, documents, letters, emails and the website. Anything that we produce reflects the association and it is vital that all our communications are free from discriminatory language, or what could be interpreted as discriminatory language. Using our values and behaviours as the foundation, inclusive language does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of any of the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010.





### What is The Equality Act 2010?<sup>1</sup>

The Equality Act 2010 brought together existing equalities legislation (eg Disability Discrimination Acts, Race Relations Acts, and Equal Pay Act). It covers the same groups that were protected by existing equality legislation but extends protections to groups not previously covered, and strengthens particular aspects of equality law. The nine 'protected characteristics' in the Act are:

- age
- disability
- gender
- gender reassignment
- race (this includes ethnic or national origins, colour and nationality)
- religion or belief
- sexual orientation
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity

### What is discriminatory language?

Discriminatory language includes words and phrases that:

- reinforce stereotypes
- reinforce derogatory labels
- exclude certain groups of people through assumptions, eg assuming the male or white population is the norm
- patronise or trivialise certain people or groups, or their experiences
- cause discomfort or offence

<sup>1</sup> You can read more about the Equality Act 2010 here: [www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance)

## Some things to remember when considering...

### Age

Age discrimination can be a serious barrier to younger and older people playing an equal part in society. Inclusive language should be sensitive to the entire age range, which is particularly important given the UK's ageing population. It is good practice to avoid terms that may be perceived as a manifestation of ageism. Ageism is found in negative, derogatory or abusive language, which can be targeted towards people of any age – young and old.

You should avoid using language that stereotypes or implies that a particular age group is more or less able. If you are using terms such as 'older' and 'younger' remember that these are relative and should be used within a clear and specific context.

### Disability

It is important to remember that the word 'disabled' is a description, and does not refer to a group of people. You should always avoid any unnecessary reference to disability, and avoid using insensitive and patronising descriptions or language. Do not use terminology that emphasises the **disability** rather than the **person**, or which equates the person with the ability or disability. You should also avoid using terminology and medical labels that reinforce stereotypes of victimhood or suffering as part of any illness, disease, disability or impairment.

Only refer to a person's disability or any specific requirements they may have where these are relevant. Where needed, phrase references by stating the person first and reference to the disability second, eg 'a child with autism' rather than an 'autistic child'. Make sure that you are using precise and accepted terms (where possible, ask the individual).

### Gender

The English language appears to have evolved on the assumption that the world is male. We refer to 'the man in the street', or 'manning the phones', and talk about the 'taxman', 'layman's terms', 'as every schoolboy knows' and so on.

Gender neutral language avoids stereotyping people according to their sex. Although stereotyping can affect men adversely, women are more often affected because former convention was to assume that an individual of unknown gender was male, or to use male gendered language to cover both sexes. For example, the words 'policeman' and 'stewardess' are gender-specific; the corresponding gender-neutral terms are 'police officer' and 'flight attendant'. Other gender-specific terms, such as 'actor' and 'actress', may be replaced by the originally male term; for example, 'actor' used regardless of gender.

You should avoid references to a person's gender except where it is relevant in a discussion. If you don't know for certain what gender to use when talking about a person's loved ones, or if you aren't sure whether someone identifies as male or female, keep your language neutral until you know what terms they prefer to use. For example, use the word 'partner' instead of 'wife' or 'husband', 'parent' instead of 'Mum' or 'Dad', and 'child' instead of 'son' or 'daughter'. You can also mix up the word order in common expressions, eg instead of saying, 'men and women', use 'women and men'.

If you do not know the marital status of a woman you should use 'Ms' instead of 'Miss'. You should also respect a woman's preference to be referred to using the title 'Ms'. A new gender-neutral title 'Mx' is now being widely used by the Government and many businesses in the UK and should be included as a title option in any application or monitoring forms.

### An example of BMA good practice

It is best practice to use language that avoids gender discrimination, for example, avoiding the term 'chairman'. We should all use the terms '**chair**', '**co-chairs**' and '**deputy chair**'.

## Gender reassignment

Under the Equality Act 2010, a person has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment if they are proposing to undergo, are undergoing, or have undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning their sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex.

**Transgender** is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender identity is a person's internal, personal sense of their own gender, whether male, female or non-binary (an umbrella term for a person who does not identify as male or female). For transgender people, the sex they were assigned at birth and their own internal gender identity do not match.

**Transsexual** is an adjective to describe a person who was assigned one sex at birth, who is, or has implemented the personal process of gender reassignment through medical interventions (including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries). Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word transgender. Transgender may be preferred by some individuals mostly because it moves away from the sensitive sexual word and focuses more appropriately on the chosen and expressed identity of that individual.

Trans-inclusive language is language that acknowledges that some people identify as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers. If transsexual is preferred, it is better to use as an adjective, eg transsexual woman or transsexual man.

For more information look at the [Stonewall glossary of terms](#).

## Marriage and civil partnership

In the UK same sex couples have been able to form a legally recognised relationship, known as a civil partnership, since 2005. Couples who form a civil partnership have a new legal status – that of a 'civil partner', where the couple gains rights and responsibilities similar to that of a marriage. A civil partnership ends only on a formal dissolution or annulment, or on the death of one of the parties. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 extends marriage to same sex couples, and couples can have a civil marriage in registry offices across England and Wales. In March 2014 legislation to allow same sex marriages was passed.

When asking about marital status, it is better to ask about a person's relationship status, or about their marital/civil partnership status. It's important that relationship status includes the options of being:

- single
- married/civil partner
- divorced/dissolved civil partnership
- widow/widower/surviving civil partner

## Pregnancy and maternity

Gender inequality is reflected in traditional ideas about the roles of women and men. Though they have shifted over time, the assumptions and stereotypes that underpin those ideas are often deeply rooted.

It is common to assume a woman will have children, look after them and take a break from paid work or work part-time to accommodate the family. If a woman is forgetful during pregnancy, this is often referred to as her 'baby brain'. However, such assumptions and stereotypes can and often do have the effect of seriously disadvantaging women.

A large majority of people that have been pregnant or have given birth identify as women. We can include intersex men and transmen who may get pregnant by saying 'pregnant people' instead of 'expectant mothers'.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> **Intersex** is a term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people can identify as male, female or non-binary.

## Race (including ethnic or national origins, colour and nationality)

The UK is a racially and culturally diverse place. Using inclusive language is about valuing others and building bridges with people from any background. Our values guide us to adapt according to audience and context, adding a touch of warmth where appropriate. Race is an area where language changes particularly quickly and what is acceptable to some may not be to others. No individual is just one single thing and, therefore, no one can be summarised with a single word. Cultures and identities are continually changing, not least because of the interactions they have with each other. It is best to be guided by the terms people use to describe themselves.

You should only use a person's race to identify, or describe, them if it is directly relevant to the point you are making. It's important not to assume that a person's appearance defines their nationality or cultural background. Avoid stereotyping and making positive or negative generalisations about members of a particular race, ethnic, cultural or national group.

In the UK, BME (black and minority ethnic) or BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) is the terminology that is normally used to describe people of non-white descent. Terms such as Black British, British Muslim, South Asian British and so on are often appropriate. Difficulties can arise with expressions that use 'black' in a negative way, eg 'black sheep', or 'black mark'.

Where appropriate, it is good practice to make documents available in other languages, eg if a large proportion of an intended audience are not native English speakers.

## Religion or belief

Not everyone defines their identity in terms of a religion but all human beings have beliefs and values. The accurate use of language in these aspects of human experience is to demonstrate respect for the beliefs of others. It is a simple but important mark of respect for others if we use language that is appropriate to them. For example, to ask a Jewish or Muslim person their Christian name not only makes no sense, but is also highly disrespectful of their beliefs. The use of the terms 'forename' or 'first name' prevents any misunderstanding and acknowledges that people have different beliefs.

You should not make assumptions about individuals based on their professed religion or belief system. Not all members of a religion follow the same practices and observances. Some of the most commonly practiced religions and beliefs in Britain are (2011 census):

- Christianity
- Islam
- Hinduism
- Sikhism
- Judaism
- Buddhism
- No religion

Further guidance on religions and the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 is provided in the [ACAS guide Religion and belief in the workplace](#) – some key areas. Further information can be found in the BBC Guide to Religion: [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions).

### An example of BMA good practice

Religion and belief: best practice resource for arranging meetings

An important way in which we affirm our commitment to equality and inclusion is by considering the implications of religion and belief as factors that may prevent participation in meetings, eg religious holidays. The best practice resource Religion and Belief: best practice resource for arranging meetings provides practical information on things to be considered in order to show respect for, and sensitivity towards everyone.

## Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Language is often used in a way that ignores the fact that a significant proportion of the population is not heterosexual. We need to be aware that all outputs, written or verbal, may be read and heard by people of differing sexual orientations. Therefore, language that we use must be inclusive and should not cause offence.

Be careful not to make assumptions about people's personal circumstances. For example, do not use terminology that assumes that everyone has a partner of the opposite sex. Always try to use the term that is preferred by the individual. The following terms are associated with sexual orientation:

### **Bisexual**

A person who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender.

### **Gay**

A man who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. The preferred term to describe homosexual men. Also a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality – some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian.

### **Heterosexual/straight**

A person who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards people of the opposite sex.

### **Homosexual**

This might be considered a more medical term used to describe someone who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards someone of the same gender. The term 'gay' is now more generally used.

### **Lesbian**

A woman who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women. Some lesbian women prefer to be referred to as gay women.

For more information and resources visit the [Stonewall website](#).

## Quick reference guide

### Age

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
When defining age ranges do not exclude older age groups. Age cut-off points are one of the major ways in which the older population are excluded.	Under 1, 1–9, 10–19, 20–34, 35–54, 55–65	Under 16, 16–19, 20–24, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54, 55–59, 60–64, 65–69, 70–74, 75+
Use the preferred term and be aware that language changes and evolves.	The elderly Aged Old people Senior citizen Pensioner	Older person Older people Older citizens Older adult
When writing job descriptions and job/committee seat advertisements, focus on the skills and aptitudes required for the post rather than number of years of experience, or age.	[XX] many years' experience Mature Young	Use words relating to the desired attributes of an applicant: proven experience adaptable enthusiastic person reliable good communication skills etc.
When interviewing candidates, try to avoid asking questions related to age, instead concentrate on the applicants' competencies.  HR has a bank of competency-based questions that also link to our values and behaviours.	How would you feel about managing older/younger people?	What skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team?

## Disability

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
<p>Avoid blanket expressions that refer only to the impairment. Make it clear that you are talking about a person. People should not be identified or defined in terms of any impairment that they may have. The general rule is put people first.</p> <p>Use adjectives, rather than nouns, where it is important to identify someone's impairment.</p>	<p>The disabled The blind</p> <p>Wheelchair-bound An asthmatic</p>	<p>Disabled people People with visual impairments, people who are partially sighted Wheelchair user An asthmatic person</p>
<p>Use the correct term for the impairment. Avoid terms that are now considered offensive. If it is necessary to refer to a person's impairment or condition, check with the individual how they wish it to be described.</p>	<p>Spastic Mongol Mentally handicapped</p>	<p>Person with cerebral palsy Person with Down's syndrome Person with learning difficulties</p>
<p>Talk about barriers and solutions.</p> <p>Avoid implying that people with impairments are less fortunate, are 'suffering', present a 'problem', or require any special treatment.</p>	<p>Special arrangements have been made to accommodate deaf people</p> <p>Please let the organisers know if you cannot use stairs</p>	<p>Please let us know if you require any assistance to enable you to attend/participate. If you would like to discuss your access requirements further, please contact...</p> <p>The facilities are equipped with loop hearing systems</p>
<p>When talking about the facilities that we have use the term 'accessible'.</p>	<p>Disabled parking space Disabled toilets Disabled lifts etc</p>	<p>Accessible parking spaces Accessible toilets Accessible lifts etc</p>
<p>Avoid any implication that a physical impairment implies a learning difficulty.</p>	<p>Posing questions to others, eg would they like some coffee? Does he take sugar?</p>	<p>Speak to the individual themselves, eg would you like some coffee?</p>
<p>Someone with learning difficulties does not necessarily have low or high intelligence, or any innate inability to learn. It specifically means that they have an impairment that is less suited to normal teaching methods.</p>	<p>Speaking slowly and assuming low intelligence</p>	<p>Speak in your normal manner and tone</p>
<p>When interviewing candidates, try to avoid asking questions related to age, instead concentrate on the applicants' competencies.</p> <p>HR has a bank of competency-based questions that also link to our values and behaviours.</p>	<p>How would you feel about managing older/younger people?</p>	<p>What skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team?</p>

## Gender

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
Where you do not know and cannot find out the correct gender of a correspondent.	Dear Mr [NAME] Dear Sir	Dear Ms/Mr [NAME] if you know the family name  Dear Sir/Madam if you don't know the family name
Where you know the first name and surname, but not the gender of the correspondent.	Dear Ms/Mr [NAME]	Dear [FIRST NAME] [FAMILY NAME], eg Dear Chris Jones
On forms, ask individuals to select from a comprehensive alphabetical list of titles, and/or leave the field blank for them to complete. Ideally, do not put the list into a perceived hierarchy.	Prof Dr Mr Mrs Miss Ms Mx etc	Dr Miss Mr Mrs Ms Mx Prof etc
Avoid using he, his, him etc to apply to both sexes. Use he, his, him, himself only when referring specifically to a male person. Instead of referring to both sexes with words such as he, him, his, use terms that cover both, eg 's/he', 'she or he', 'they'.	The lecturer will display his timetable on his office door  Each student is responsible for material on loan to him	Lecturers will display their timetables on their office doors  Students are responsible for material they borrow
Avoid using his or her after 'each', 'someone', 'anyone', 'nobody'.	Anyone who wants his work evaluated	Anyone who wants their work evaluated
Avoid using man to mean people in general. It is not good practice to present material with the disclaimer that all masculine nouns and pronouns are to be taken as referring to both females and male.	Man or mankind Man-hours Manpower	Humanity, humans, human beings, people, or society Work hours or staff time  Staff, workforce, personnel, workers
Avoid using terms that may give offence to women or men.	Girls Ladies Dear Son Love	The person's name, their professional title or 'men' and 'women'
Avoid irrelevant, gratuitous gender descriptions.	A female doctor A male nurse	A doctor A nurse
Avoid using Miss/Mrs unless the individual concerned expressly indicates that they wish otherwise.	Miss/Mrs	Ms – This term is intended to parallel Mr as it does not identify marital status
Avoid titles that imply that the normal job-holder is of a particular gender.	Chairman Policeman Cleaning ladies	Chair, chairperson Police officer Cleaners

## Gender reassignment

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
Use the term trans/transsexual/transgender as an adjective rather than a noun	A transsexual	Transsexual/transgender person or trans person
When you must use a gender specific pronoun, use the term preferred by the individual. If it is not possible to ask a transgender person which pronoun is preferred, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person's appearance and gender expression.	She or her (for a trans-male, ie female to male) He or his (for a trans-female, ie male to female)	He or his (for a trans-male, ie female to male) She or her (for a trans-female, ie male to female)
Don't use phrases that are reductive and overly-simplify a complex subject. A person's sex is determined by a number of factors.	Biologically male/female Genetically male/female Born and man/woman	Assigned male/female at birth Designated male/female at birth
Be careful when describing the personal process of gender reassignment.	Sex change/sex change operation Pre-operative Post-operative	Transition Referring to a sex-change operation, or using terms such as pre-operative or post-operative inaccurately suggests that one must have surgery in order to transition.

## Marriage and civil partnership

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
Application forms and equal opportunities monitoring forms should be amended to include this new legal relationship status.	Asking someone's marital status or specifying marital status options: – single – married – divorced – widow/widower	What is your relationship status? or What is your marital/civil partnership status? Relationship status options: – single – married/civil partner – divorced/dissolved civil partnership – widow/widower/surviving civil partner

## Pregnancy and maternity

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
A large majority of people that have been pregnant or have given birth identify as women. However, there are some intersex men and trans men who may get pregnant.	Expectant mothers	Pregnant people

### Race (including ethnic or national origins, colour and nationality)

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
Use adjectives, rather than nouns, where it is important to identify someone's race.	The Asians etc...	Asian students etc...
Avoid irrelevant, gratuitous ethnic descriptions.	A Chinese professor	A professor
It is important to always allow people to define themselves.	Coloured people Black/Asian when referring to all minority ethnic groups	The term preferred by the individual, eg Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Black etc

### Religion or belief

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
<p>Avoid using terms that may offend people's religious sensibilities.</p> <p>Surname is not unacceptable. However, this word may originate from sire-name, or the name derived from one's father.</p> <p>The term 'last name' should not be used as it could be confusing to Asian groups who place their family name first.</p>	<p>Christian name</p> <p>Surname</p> <p>Last name</p>	<p>First name, given name, forename or personal</p> <p>Family name (preferred term)</p>

### Sexual orientation

Helpful hints	Instead of...	Use...
Use the term preferred by the individual.	The blanket term homosexual	<p>Gay, lesbian, bisexual, gay man, gay woman</p> <p>Use all these terms to describe these groups/ individuals</p> <p>LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) is a common acronym used for the collective term</p>
Use adjectives, rather than nouns, where it is important to identify someone's sexual orientation.	Lesbians, gays or bisexuals	People who are lesbian, gay or bisexual
Avoid assumptions about a person's sexual orientation and using heterosexual-centred language. Such language is based on the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal, valid or moral basis for partnerships.	<p>Husband, wife and spouse</p> <p>Girlfriend or boyfriend</p> <p>Family planning clinic</p>	<p>Partner or accompanying person (so as to not discriminate between married, unmarried or same sex partners)</p> <p>Partner (or term preferred by the individual)</p> <p>Sexual health clinic or sexual health and wellbeing clinic</p>

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