

A guide to creating inclusive content and language

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When writing content, the intention is to communicate information. For that communication to be effective it needs to appropriately address all audiences for which it is intended. It would be doing a poor job if a large proportion of the audience was unable to access that content or believed that content was not for them. By creating inclusive content, the aim is to make all content accessible to as many people as possible.

This page contains some guidance and best practice for writing inclusively. The Government Digital Service also has [detailed guidance on writing clearly for different channels and audiences](#) and you can find here a [list of words to avoid in order to ensure your content uses plain English](#).

Inclusive content

Inclusive content is content that serves and resonates with many people with varying characteristics. Web content has the potential to be accessed by people all over the world, with a wide variety of characteristics and lived experiences. By being mindful of this and taking time to understand the people you are talking to, you will actively include more people in the conversation.

How to produce inclusive content

There are two main areas to consider when creating inclusive content:

- Accessibility – Ensuring that everyone who wishes to access the content can do so.
- Inclusive Language – Using language that actively includes people and resonates with a wider audience.

Inclusive language

Inclusive language avoids biases, slang, or expressions that discriminate against groups of people based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Inclusive language allows you to resonate with more audiences by speaking and writing in more impartial ways.

Language can build relationships and forge connections, but it's equally able to create barriers and impact someone's sense of belonging. Particularly in writing, impact is more important than intent.

By using inclusive language, we aim to reach and engage a wider audience of people with the content and make them feel welcome and included.

1. Ability and disability
2. Mental health
3. Age
4. Sex, gender and sexual orientation
5. Race, ethnicity and religion
6. Write clearly and concisely
7. Ensure designs and images reflect a diverse group of people

1. Ability and disability

Every person is a whole person – no matter how they interact with the world. Focus on what they need to do, what tools they use, and avoid making assumptions. If a person's situation, medical condition, illness, or injury is relevant to the content, be as specific as possible and avoid inserting value judgements about their circumstance (for example, use has multiple sclerosis, not is afflicted with or suffers from). Use positive language and do not label people when talking about disabilities and conditions.

Just like with language around race, gender, or other identities, it's always best to ask people how they identify rather than assuming.

- Do not describe people as disabled or handicapped. Use people living with a disability or disabled person.
- Do not describe people as confined to a wheelchair. Use wheelchair user.
- Do not use diabetic people, use people with diabetes.
- Avoid terms that contribute to stigmas around disability or mental illness: crazy, dumb, lame, insane, psycho, schizophrenic, or stupid.
- Avoid terms that contribute to stigmas around sensory disabilities: blind spot or tone deaf.
- Most disabled people are comfortable with the words used to describe daily living. People who use wheelchairs 'go for walks' and people with visual impairments may be very pleased – or not – 'to see you'. An impairment may just mean that some things are done in a different way.
- Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example 'deaf to our pleas' or 'blind drunk'.
- The term able-bodied is sometimes used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. Some members of the disability community oppose its use because it

implies that all people with disabilities lack “able bodies” or the ability to use their bodies well. They prefer non-disabled or enabled as more accurate terms. The term non-disabled or the phrase does not have a disability are more neutral choices. Able-bodied is an appropriate term to use in some cases, such as talking about the proportion of able-bodied members in the work force.

- Abnormality is a term used to describe something deviating from what is normal. The term can be appropriate when used in a medical context, such as abnormal curvature of the spine or an abnormal test result. However, when used to describe an individual, abnormal is widely viewed as a derogative term. Avoid referring to someone who does not have a disability as a normal person as it implies that people with disabilities are deviant or strange. Typical is a better choice. The phrase abnormal behaviour reflects social-cultural standards and is open to different interpretations. Be cautious when using the term. Explain what it means in the context in which it is being used.
- Be aware that the word chronic can confuse people, as some think it means “bad” or “serious”.
- The word normally in a health context can make people feel they aren’t “normal”. Use usually instead.

2. Mental health

Do not describe people as mentally ill. Instead use mental health condition or mental health problems.

3. Age

Avoid referring to someone’s age, unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing about (for example, with vaccination, screening or testing programmes for particular age groups. An example of this is chlamydia testing as tests are free for under-25s.).

Here are some of the terms the National Health Service (NHS) uses for different stages of life:

- fertilised egg: from conception to 14 days
- embryo: from 2 to 6 weeks
- baby: during pregnancy, at birth and up to 1 year.
- toddler: 1 to 3 years
- child: 4 to 12 years
- teenager: 13 to 19 years
- young people: 16 to 24 years
- adult: generally from age 18 but this may vary. Be specific, for example: "adults aged 19 to 64"
- From 65 onwards, specify ages: over-65s, over-75s, over-80s. In contexts where this is not possible, use older person or older people.

When you need to be more specific, for example if you're writing about medicines dosage, give the actual age. For example, "teenagers aged 16 and over".

- Don't use women or older relatives as a substitute for novice or beginner. For example, don't say something is so simple your mother can use it.
- Do not use the words: elderly, middle aged, OAP, old age pensioner, pensioner, senior.

4. Sex, gender and sexual orientation

The language around sex, gender and sexual orientation changes all the time and it's an area that people hold strong and differing opinions about. We try to make sure that we are in touch with the communities we are writing for and we update our guidance regularly. This section should help you get started but the best thing is to test your content and services with the people who use them.

Only mention sex, gender or sexual orientation if they're relevant, for example, to signpost people and help them get the health information and access to treatment they need.

When to use "sex" and when to use "gender"

Many people think that sex and gender are the same, but they mean different things. It's important to be clear about the difference.

Sex

Sex is biological (male or female). It's based not only on the genes we inherit, but also on how our external and internal sex and reproductive organs work and respond to hormones. Sex is the label that's recorded when a baby's birth is registered.

We use "sex" or, better still, the body part associated with biological sex when we're writing about things like screening that is sex specific, for example, breast and cervical screening.

Sex assigned or registered at birth

We use the phrase "sex assigned at birth" when we're talking about trans health and gender dysphoria, as this is the language our audience uses. In other cases, we use "the sex someone was registered with at birth" because user research shows that most people understand this better as it refers to an actual event.

Intersex

We use "intersex" in some content about people with differences in sex development (DSD) because some people prefer it to DSD.

DSD involves genes, hormones and reproductive organs, including genitals. A person's physical sex development, internally, externally or both can be different to most other people's.

Most people with DSD have a clear sex that is registered at birth. Some adults with DSD prefer the term "intersex" to DSD but they may want to keep their legal sex as male or female. Other people see "intersex" as distinct from male and female.

Gender

Gender is more complex. It refers to our internal sense of who we are and how we see and describe ourselves.

Someone may see themselves as a man, a woman or neither (non-binary). Being non-binary can mean having no gender, a different gender, or being in between genders. Gender can be fixed or fluid. Some people identify with a gender different to the sex they were registered with.

We use the word "gender" when we're:

- discussing the social idea or identity as opposed to the biological sex, for example, if we're writing about gender dysphoria or transgender health and social care
- writing about a survey or report based on gender, such as gender diversity
- writing about the results of a national census, where there is a question about gender identity as well as sex to identify the trans (including non-binary) population

Gender neutral language

Make content gender neutral wherever possible. If you're writing about a hypothetical person or if you're unsure of the person's pronouns, use they or them instead of he or she.

Avoid words and phrases that indicate gender bias, such as irrelevant descriptions of appearance.

Avoid guessing sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. When in doubt, either reconsider the need to include this information or ask the person you're referring to how they identify and what terms they prefer.

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- Use different sex instead of opposite sex (because this recognises gender as a spectrum, rather than a binary).
- We support using they or their as singular pronouns.
- Avoid guys as a way to refer to mixed-gender groups.

- Don't make assumptions about marital or family relationships (for example, use spouse or partner instead of husband and wife; use parent instead of mother and father).
- Avoid asking users for their title - such as Mr, Miss, Mrs, or Ms - or make this information optional.

Transgender

We use "trans" as an umbrella term to describe people whose current gender identity or way of expressing their gender differs from the sex they were registered with at birth. Some, but not all, trans people want to transition (change) socially or medically or both.

We use "trans woman" for someone who was registered male at birth and now identifies as a woman and "trans man" for someone who was registered female at birth and now identifies as a man.

We use "trans woman" or "trans man" in content about the particular health needs of trans people - for example, screening or treatments that trans people need to be aware of, like advising a trans man about cervical and breast screening.

Otherwise, we leave out the word "trans" and just refer to men and women, if relevant.

Sexual orientation

We use language about sexual orientation when it's helpful to signpost or help people get the health information and access to treatment they need.

For example, when we're talking about specific sexual health services or sexual health content, we use words like:

- lesbian
- gay
- bisexual
- men who have sex with men (MSM includes men who may not identify as gay)

5. Race, ethnicity, and religion

Only refer to a person's ethnic heritage or religion if it's relevant to the content.

Avoid using words, images, or situations that reinforce racial, ethnic, or religious stereotypes (even stereotypes that may appear to be positive). Avoid the term non-white, or other terms that treat whiteness as a default.

Don't make assumptions: ask how people identify themselves, and be aware of complexities within racial, ethnic, and religious identities. For example, not all Arabs are Muslim, and many nationalities and ethnicities include various religious practices and traditions.

- When referring to a person's race or ethnicity, use adjectives, not nouns (for example, an Asian person, not an Asian).
- The term Caucasian is seen as out of date and even offensive to many people.
- The terms ethnic and minority should be used with caution, and never to refer to an individual. Don't use as a synonym for people of colour. Women do not constitute a minority, although they may be linked with minorities in various civil-rights contexts.

6. Write clearly and concisely

We want to use language that our users can understand. Use plain English, and avoid jargon and technical terms whenever possible, as these can alienate people to whom they are unfamiliar.

Similarly, avoid using idioms or cultural expressions (for example: "it should be a piece of cake"), as you have no way of knowing whether a user knows or has heard the term before.

When using medical terms, it would be advisable to explain them when they're not commonly known. Consider using a plain English term first, then the medical term. Example: piles (haemorrhoids).

Be concise:

- Use short words, sentences and paragraphs whenever possible.
- Use subheadings and bulleted lists to help users find what they need.
- Use the active voice – "find a pharmacy" rather than "a pharmacy can be found"

Always be aware of the audience you are writing for. This does not mean though, that content focused towards a more educated and technically literate audience can or should use more complex or technical language. Research has shown the more educated the person, the more specialist their knowledge, the greater their preference for reading plain English is.

Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations and acronyms often confuse readers. Avoid them whenever possible.

If an acronym is necessary for future reference, spell the full word and follow with the acronym in parentheses on the first reference. For example, National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

Some acronyms are more recognisable than their full spellings. For example, NHS, NASA, FBI. In such instances, the acronym is always acceptable, at the writer's discretion.

Be aware that accessibility tools can sometimes have difficulties with abbreviations like etc, e.g. and i.e. so avoid using them.

Numbers

- Use numerals (1, 2, 3 and so on) for numbers (including 1 and 2), as people find numerals easier to read and they scan for them.
- For numbers over 999, use a comma for clarity – for example, 1,000.
- For numbers less than 1, use 0 before the decimal point – for example, 0.25.
- Do not use superscript. It does not always read out correctly on screen readers and could confuse people.

Ranges of numbers, dates and time

It is preferable to use “to” for time, date and numerical ranges, not hyphens or dashes.

Examples:

- The surgery is open Monday to Friday, 2pm to 6pm.
- A BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 means you're a healthy weight.

7. Ensure designs and images reflect a diverse group of people

When users look at your web content, you want them to see people (or figures) that look like them, as this will engage them more.

Ensure that you show different types of people doing many different things (for instance, a person of colour doing the talking while others listen, a woman in a wheelchair at an executive desk, etc.)

Consider what kind of stories your imagery tells. It can be quite easy to unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes by showing people of colour in menial job roles overseen by white people in executive positions, if care is not taken.

Also be careful to show a diverse range of body-types. Most images we see in the media show typically young, attractive, straight and able-bodied people. Obviously, most of us don't fit this description.

Other resources

[Writing about ethnicity - GOV.UK](#)

[Guidance on inclusive language - words to use and avoid when writing about disability - GOV.UK](#)

About this guide

The guidance was provided to NIHR by [Diversiti UK](#). Diversiti UK is a multiple award-winning diversity and inclusion training provider and currently holds the title of 'Best Equality and Diversity' training provider 2021.