What is biased language?

Writers aim to avoid *bias*, which refers to "the implied or irrelevant evaluation of the group or groups they are writing about," (American Psychological Association [APA], 2019). Writing is biased if it overgeneralizes groups, uses insensitive labels, or creates false hierarchies by using one group (generally the author's own) as the standard. Biased language is harmful because it perpetuates stereotypes or judgments against marginalized groups. It also harms your own credibility as a writer and researcher.

Where should I watch out for bias in my writing?

Longstanding cultural biases are often unconscious; we make judgements, comparisons, and connections without realizing it (Greenwald & Banaji, 2013). For this reason, even careful writers sometimes use biased language. Just as you proofread your paper for grammar or spelling errors, you should keep an eye out for biased language (APA, 2019). Below are a few common areas where bias can appear.

Associating genders with occupations

The names of some occupations imply that all people in that group identify as one gender. If possible, use a nongendered term instead (e.g., "firefighter" instead of "fireman," or "homemaker" instead of "housewife"). In addition, writers occasionally assign gender through pronouns:

> A nurse with a similar cultural background to her patients may earn trust more easily.

The following example from W. Edwards Deming's *The New Economics* (1994) assigns a gender with both job title and pronouns:

> The top salesman may be a heavy loss to the company by overselling—selling to a customer a bigger copying machine than he (the customer) needs.

However, people of any gender can buy or sell oversized printers. In the past, many authors used phrases like "he or she," "he/she," and "(s)he," but these combinations imply that a person can only be male or female, excluding people who use neither pronoun. Using both masculine and feminine pronouns will also disrupt the sentence's rhythm, slow down readers, and draw unnecessary attention to the mechanics of your writing (Kolln & Gray, 2012). Here are a few better ways to remove gendered pronouns:

Drop the gender-specific term altogether.

> The top seller may be a heavy loss to the company by overselling—selling a bigger copying machine than the customer needs.

Make the subject plural.

> Nurses with a similar cultural background to their patients may earn trust more easily.

Use "they" for a singular subject. Although this option was discouraged in the past, it is now accepted by advocacy groups, dictionaries, and the APA.

A nurse with a similar cultural background to <u>their</u> patients may earn trust more easily.

Names, Labels, and Pejorative Terms

Respect those you write about by calling them the names they use to describe themselves. This applies to the names of groups, as well as personal names and pronouns. It is important to note that a group or individual's preferred labels can change over time and in different social contexts. Members of the same group may hold different opinions about what language they should use to describe themselves. Consider asking research participants what language is appropriate and look at recent scholarly research on the communities you study.

The APA (2019) recommends avoiding labels that fail to acknowledge a person's individuality and humanity. Instead of "the homeless," use "people experiencing homelessness;" instead of "diabetics," use "people with diabetes." Labels concerning disabilities will vary from group to group, requiring authors to carefully research the communities they write about.

Nonparallel Comparisons

Even when using the preferred names for a group, writers sometimes include biased language when comparing them to other groups. For instance, an author writing about "Asian Americans and Black Americans" has described one group with a color and one with a place. Instead, use the same criterion when describing both groups: "Asian Americans and African Americans."

When discussing non-White racial and ethnic groups, use terms like "people of color," "underrepresented groups," or "marginalized groups" rather than "minorities," a term with pejorative connotations. When you do need to distinguish between a dominant and nondominant group, modify the word "minority" (e.g., ethnic minority, religious minority).