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Striving for a more inclusive workplace? Start by examining your language



The Precise Language Team at Google / February 2021



A version of this tutorial originally appeared in [the free Primer app](#). It's based on principles developed by Google's Precise Language team, which works to empower the usage of inclusive language in the workplace.

When it comes to making the workplace more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, brands and agencies sometimes fall into the trap of “checking the box” rather than focusing on building inclusive behaviors and mindsets that translate to employee experiences. According to a [recent PwC study on diversity and inclusion at global organizations](#), 76% of companies cite diversity and inclusion as a value or priority, while just 22% of employees report being aware of relevant efforts at their companies.

Diversity and inclusion: Organizational priority vs. employee awareness

- 76% of organizations say diversity and inclusion are a value or priority.
- 22% of employees say they are aware of any existing diversity and inclusion efforts at their companies.

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Source: PwC, Global, Cross-Industry Employee Survey on Diversity and Inclusion Programming, 2020.



Diversity, equity, and inclusion can be complex topics to tackle, but there are many simple actions that companies can take today to help create workplaces where people from all backgrounds and experiences feel able to thrive. One is using precise language that's accurate, empowering, and inclusive.

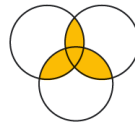
Here are four steps to help you examine and update the language you use to make your workplace and your marketing more inclusive.



Teach yourself about the relationship between language and power



Evaluate the words you use



Account for intersectionality to avoid oversimplification



Commit to keep practicing

1. Teach yourself about the relationship between language and power

The words we use every day have a real impact – on ourselves, our colleagues, and our institutions. Language can help maintain systems of power that prevent a workplace from being inclusive by creating a hostile environment for employees, especially those who identify with underrepresented communities.

Power stems from dangerous historical and current stigmas around elements of identity, such as race, national origin, education level, age, gender, sexual orientation, and more. Generally speaking, individuals and groups with more power have access to more opportunities and can impose their ways of thinking and doing on people who have less power, often without realizing it.

Language can help maintain systems of power that prevent a workplace from being inclusive and create a hostile environment for employees.

Language can be a reflection of this, since people with more power often influence not only what language is used, but how it is used in the workplace and in other aspects of daily life. As a result, the words we use can perpetuate a cycle of systemic inequity that's hard to break. By making yourself aware of power imbalances, you can start addressing them to improve your workplace for everyone.

2. Evaluate the words you use

Language evolves over time, such that words you used a few years ago may not work well forever. That's why it's important to continually evaluate the language we use and periodically trade in words as new information becomes available.

When choosing your words, remember the most important principle of precise language is personal agency.

For instance, while the term "minority" is still being used in the United States as a way to describe a person who isn't white; it is disliked by many; and, in some cases, it's factually incorrect. By replacing "minority" with a more precise term, like "historically underrepresented," your words are more accurate and empowering to people in your workplace who identify as such.

When choosing your words, remember the most important principle of precise language is personal agency. Put simply, always use the names, pronouns, and words that people and communities have chosen to identify themselves by.

3. Account for intersectionality to avoid oversimplification

An important part of using precise language is ensuring your marketing materials, websites, and any other assets reflect the world around us. Doing this effectively means acknowledging the intersectionality of people's identities, and ensuring your campaigns represent this intersectionality accordingly.

Take this sentence as an example: "COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on people of

inadvertently excludes small business owners who are people of color. A more inclusive approach would be to say that “COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on small businesses owned by people of color and women.” You could even take this a step further by explicitly acknowledging the nature of this disproportionate impact: “As a result of preexisting financial, geographical, and social disparities, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on small businesses owned by people of color and women.”

If you fail to recognize and reflect intersectionality in your marketing, you run the risk of reducing rich, multidimensional identities into oversimplified stories that can perpetuate stereotypes and be hurtful to the people they’re intended to uplift. Always opt for nuanced narratives, and preferably ones that come directly from the people who are a part of the narrative, even when they challenge historical views of how something should be stated.

4. Commit to practice, always

Inclusion isn’t a trend. It’s necessary to shift systemic disparities, and that requires a willingness to continually examine and address power imbalances.

Routinely evaluate your company’s practices to create more effective communication and relationships among your workforce. Consider surveying all employees to get their input, and decide how you’ll measure success. For instance, you might aim for 95% of employees you survey saying that your company communicates effectively, enables productivity, and appreciates their work.

Routinely evaluate your company’s practices to find opportunities to create more effective communication and relationships between all people.

Like learning to use any new tool, applying precise language principles may be tricky at first, but it’s important to keep doing so, even when it feels uncomfortable or inconvenient. Commit to being as accurate, empowering, and inclusive with your language as possible. And refuse to stop learning when it comes to making your workplace — and the broader world — more inclusive. People will notice.

Find more practical tips on inclusion in the workplace in the free Primer app.

The Precise Language Team at Google

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