

LANGUAGE GUIDE



Instead of	Considering using
handicapped disabled person	person/people with a disability
homeless person homeless people	person/people experiencing homelessness
low-income low-income communities	underserved communities high needs communities
mentally ill	person experiencing mental illness person living with a mental health condition
victim	person who has experienced (insert trauma)
convict felon	person who is incarcerated person who was formerly incarcerated
addict	person with a substance use disorder

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

<https://counseling.northwestern.edu/blog/inclusive-language-guide>
<https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines>

Like society as a whole, language changes over time. Those changes are designed to help communities better understand one another, and using inclusive, people-first language is an important first step in acknowledging individuals and their most innate characteristics.

The following language guide is our compass. It will assist us in communicating more effectively with the communities we serve, helps us to connect with one another more deeply, and through the use of empowering language, affirms people reflecting a broad range of identities, perspectives and cultural backgrounds. Use it to validate individuals and their experiences, and avoid using language that victimizes, shames and/or strips clients of dignity and choice.

As we strive to include language that reflects individual choice and mirrors how people talk about themselves, it’s important we remember that, like society, this guide will continue to change.

This means, at times, we may need to ask individuals how they want to be identified; and learning new information can be challenging.

See new knowledge as a gift, and commit to using the language outlined so VOA clients feel seen, heard and valued – exactly as they are.

*All language APA sourced and approved

Ageism is discrimination based primarily on an individual's age. It negatively impacts people of all ages, but older adults experience ageism most often.

In most instances, referring to an individual's age is unnecessary. Instead, consider identifying generational cohorts and avoid unintentional insults.

Use language that shows dignity and respect for older adults, and never use words that patronize, sentimentalize, distorts or ignores people based on their age.

Use medical terminology accurately, and when sharing narratives, be sure they support people of all ages.

Remember that having a sense of “self” is important at any age; so, when you are unsure about how an individual identifies themselves – it's good to ask.

Avoid terms like

elderly

frail

aged

senior/senior citizen

old people

old folks

Considering using

older adults

older people

the older population

persons who are 65 years and older

baby boomers (born 1946–1964)

the silent generation (born 1928–1945)

Today, people with disabilities make up the largest minority population in the United States, but society, as a whole, is unaware how stigmatizing our everyday language can be.

Ableism is stereotyping, prejudice, discriminatory attitudes and behavior, and social oppression toward people with disabilities. It's harmful – even when it's unintended.

When speaking with or about people with disabilities, avoid language that suggests victimhood, and instead choose person-centered vocabulary that maintains the dignity and integrity of the individual.

Remember, not all disabilities can be seen. Take special care in acknowledging some individuals may be experiencing mental illness or may be neurodivergent. Sociologist Judy Singer defines neurodivergence as any structured, consistent way the brains work differently for a group of people than it does for the majority of others.

Instead of	Considering using
special needs	person with a disability
physically/mentally challenged	person with an intellectual disability
differently-abled	person with a congenital disability
	person with a physical disability
	person with a traumatic brain injury
brain damaged	person with autism
autistic person	person with epilepsy
epileptic	person who uses a wheelchair
wheelchair bound person	person living with paraplegia
paraplegic	deaf person
person who is deaf	
hearing-impaired person	person who is hard-of-hearing
person who is hearing impaired	
person with hearing loss	
person with deafness and blindness	deaf-blind person
	person who is blind
the blind	visually impaired person
visually challenged person	vision-impaired person
sight-challenged person	person who is visually impaired
	person who has low vision

How individuals are recognized, through name and pronouns, is one of the most important ways to show respect and basic courtesy. That’s why misgendering, or referring to a person’s sexual preference, which suggests voluntary choice, and not their sexual orientation, which affirms the individual, can be especially hurtful.

Regularly using inclusive, gender-neutral language can curb breakdowns in communication and the instance of other avoidable, embarrassing blunders.

Gender identity is not visible – it’s an internal sense of being. And outsiders do not get to choose the identity of others. While some individuals align across their-birth assigned sex, their gender identity, gender expression and how others interpret their gender – some people do not.

That’s why it’s critical we commit to cultivating a culture where everyone feels valued. Asking an individual’s preferred pronouns and using inclusive vocabulary is where healthy communication and culture begins.

Tell me your pronouns

Example

He/Him/His	He called The phone belongs to him The phone is his
She/Her/Hers	She called The phone belongs to her The phone is hers
They/Them/Theirs (singular they)	They called The phone belongs to them The phone is theirs

Gender-inclusive language

Instead of	Use
businessman chairman	chairperson head of ... director of ...
mankind	all of humanity human beings people
man-made	artificial, synthetic
mailman	mail carrier
congressman	member of congress

The communities we serve and the individuals with whom we serve are diverse – and we believe diversity and representation are strengths.

African American/Black

American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African (AMENA)

Asian/Asian American

Hispanic, Latin(a/o), Latinx

Indigenous

Indigenous Peoples worldwide

Terms to know

Explanation

Race	The social construction and categorization of people based on perceived shared physical traits that result in the maintenance of a sociopolitical hierarchy
Ethnicity	A characterization of people based on having a shared culture (e.g., language, food, music, dress, values, and beliefs) related to common ancestry and shared history
Bias	As partiality: an inclination or predisposition for or against something
Culture	The values, beliefs, language, rituals, traditions, and other behaviors that are passed from one generation to another within any social group
Intersectionality	The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups to produce and sustain complex inequities <i>(Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989)</i>
Cultural Competence	Ability to collaborate effectively with individuals from different cultures; such competence improves health care experiences and outcomes
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, People of Color