

"...as people called by Jesus to live holy lives..."
(Bethel's Covenant)

Language is a Powerful Tool

We recognize our responsibility to communicate in ways that do not exclude individuals. To that end, the faculty at Bethel encourage members of the college community to employ inclusive language and images when speaking about or addressing human beings in academic work, public discourse, classroom discussion, college documents and publications, and in worship experiences.

(paraphrased from the 1997
Bethel College faculty statement
on inclusive language)

"We believe that life is sacred and people have worth because they are created in God's image. We will value human life in all its diversity and fullness, recognizing that women and men of all races, ages and ability levels reflect the creative genius of our Maker."
(Bethel's Covenant)

Language is a powerful tool. It shapes our perceptions of the world around us and how others view us as individuals. The Bible teaches us to value all people because they are created in God's image. Some traditional uses of language have been perceived as excluding a substantial group of people. To be clear in our Christian witness, the Bethel faculty encourages the use of inclusive language.

Many academic disciplines require inclusive language for scholarly work. The publication guidelines of the American Psychological Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and many other professional organizations offer further examples and applications of inclusive language. Copies of many of these guidelines are available in the bookstore, on the web, and in the library.

General Guidelines

1. Avoid demeaning terms or expressions that reinforce demeaning attitudes about persons or groups based on age, disability, ethnicity, gender, race, or national origin.
2. Avoid using masculine terms to refer to people who may be either male or female.
3. Avoid using terms which presume that all people are the same, and in particular presume that a socially dominant subgroup represents the larger group.

Some Suggestions For Using Inclusive Language

Culture and Race

1. Acknowledge that cultural diversity can exist among people from the same racial, ethnic, and national background
2. Use realistic pictures and illustrations. Use positive examples of men and women from all racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds.
3. Depict a variety of lifestyles. Avoid putting people only in stereotypical settings. (e.g. Not all Africans live in little villages; millions of them live in cities.) Try to offer genuine insights into the lifestyles and cultural settings of all people.
4. Avoid generalizing one feature to all members of a racial or ethnic group: e.g. the notion that all people on welfare are Black, crime occurs only in certain communities, the suburbs are populated only by white people, all Indians are Hindu, all Arabs are rich, etc.
5. Be conscious of sources used in research, writing, or speaking. Many publications once considered authoritative have not considered the interests and contributions of diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Age

1. Biases against aging are often so deeply ingrained in our culture that they are difficult to identify. As a result, they may unintentionally creep into our writing.
2. Rather than stressing the needs and experiences of separate age groups (children, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged people, elderly), writers and speakers can point to common experience through the life span.

Class

1. Choose words that reflect that human worth is not measured in terms of economic status or employment.
2. Do not assume that lack of formal education is synonymous with ignorance, illiteracy, lack of intelligence, character, worth or drive. Avoid using "illiterate" as a put-down.
3. Do not use language that demeans residents of certain geographic locations.

Disabilities

A person with fully functioning arms and legs is not inherently better than a person with less dexterity or mobility. Feelings and attitudes of mental or physical superiority obstruct our relationships with our neighbors. "Disability" is a general term for a permanent or semi-permanent condition that may interfere with major life activities: seeing, walking, hearing, learning, lifting. It may be physical, mental or sensory in nature.

1. The person is more important than the condition. Therefore, refer to "people with disabilities," "a person with . . .," "a woman who has," "a man who is. . ." Avoid phrases like "the handicapped," "the crippled," "the deformed," "the invalid," or "the disabled."
2. When one function is impaired, do not imply that other functions are impaired as well.
3. Seek language that presents a positive appreciation of the person. Refrain from "pity" language. Avoid emotional descriptions of disabilities such as "unfortunate." Do not say that a person is "afflicted with" or "victim of" a disability. Emphasize abilities by saying that a person "uses a wheelchair," rather than indicating a person "is confined to a wheelchair." Say a person "walks with crutches," not "is crippled."

4. Avoid vague terms such as "differently abled" or "physically challenged." These terms may be perceived as patronizing and reveal discomfort with individuals who have disabilities.

Gender

1. Use a substitute for words like "man" or "mankind" when you mean a more inclusive term. Although the lack of an inclusive third-person singular pronoun in English is sometimes awkward, words like "humans," "humanity," "beings," "people" and "all" are often adequate substitutes.
2. Rewrite a sentence to eliminate an unnecessary pronoun. (e.g. "The average American drinks his coffee black," to "The average American drinks black coffee.")
3. Alternate male and female expressions and examples.
4. It is often a workable and unobtrusive solution to make a sentence plural in order to avoid the use of a generic "he." (e.g. **NOT** "If a professor wants his students to respect him, he will come to class prepared." **INSTEAD**, "If professors want their students to respect them, they will come to class prepared.")
5. Avoid using the word "woman" as an adjective before a title, as in "woman minister" or "woman teacher" unless there is a specific intention to point to the gender than to the role.
6. When designating men and women in the same sentence, parallel terms should be used so that women are not put into an inferior or dependent position. For instance, a man should not be identified by gender and woman by role, as in "man and wife."
7. Many people find the terms "ladies" or "girl" condescending when used as substitutes for "women" or "woman." Identify women by their own names, not by their roles unless there is a specific need for it.
8. Reference to a woman's marital status should be avoided except when it is specifically to the point. When using the terms "Ms.," "Mrs.," or "Miss," the form that the particular woman in question prefers should be used. If this preference is not known, use the term which does not designate marital status, "Ms."
9. Avoid humor based on generalizations regarding gender. Avoid jokes about dumb jocks, hysterical females, and motor mouths which undermine the intellectual ability, emotional stability, or dignity of people.
10. To deprecate a person by describing her or him in terms of the opposite sex is unacceptable as in "tomboy" or "sissy."
11. Language should clearly indicate that both women and men are involved in the activities and accomplishments of the human race. Girls should not always be shown playing only with dolls nor boys only with trucks. Provide a wide variety of options and role models to encourage wide participation in all activities rather than presenting choices limited by gender-linked role-stereotyping.
12. Do not imply that certain jobs are limited to either men or women. When talking about occupations, avoid personal pronouns that may make unwarranted assumptions.
13. Seek equity in all references. Do not identify women by marital status, number of children and other extraneous information when parallel treatment is not accorded to men. Vary the order of references—his and hers, women and men, wives and husbands.
14. Do not assign emotional or moral roles exclusively to one sex. Both women and men may need care and protection, both can be spiritually and morally strong, both can be competent and independent. Seek ways to show strong, independent women; avoid showing men as unemotional or always tough and uncaring.

We would like to affirm that these suggestions are truly that: suggestions. A psychology course on Lifespan Development will necessarily stress the needs and experiences of separate age groups and an English course could certainly assign and affectionately discuss novels that reflect strong biases toward class and race. Our goal is to encourage a humble and Christ-like use of language, not to fetter specific disciplines. We encourage open discussions about the use of language, affirming with Bethel's Covenant that "community life at Bethel should be marked by mutual encouragement, sensitivity, and consideration for others."

This document, provided by the Family & Gender Equity Committee of the Bethel college faculty, is based on suggested formats gleaned from a number of sources (most notably Fuller Theological Seminary, Calvin College and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America).