



EPOS GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDELINES





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Introduction

Language not only reflects but also shapes our thoughts. Written, spoken, and visual communication often reveals hidden cultural or personal biases that communicators may be unaware of. Raising awareness and fostering conscious language use are key steps towards achieving the EPOS' goal of inclusive and respectful communication.

Language is generally recognised as having a crucial role in shaping cultural and social attitudes, and it can either reinforce gender-related stereotypes and biases or fight them and promote gender equality. Therefore, replacing old habits with more inclusive expressions by default is essential, and these guidelines offer practical guidance and examples to help colleagues across research organizations and countries enhance their communication. While focusing on written and oral communication, this handbook aims to cultivate positive habits in all forms of communication, as inclusive language offers numerous benefits. In particular it:

- Promotes an inclusive and respectful environment.
- Encourages diverse perspectives.
- Reflects commitment to equity and social justice.
- Supports well-being and engagement.
- Enhances clear and inclusive communication.
- Facilitates the compliance with ethical standards and funding requirements.
- Attracts a diverse range of researchers and staff.
- Builds trust with community and stakeholders.

This document aims to raise awareness within the EPOS community about the impact of language on inclusiveness and provides practical guidance for fostering a more inclusive, equal, and welcoming environment through a conscious use of language.

EPOS operates primarily in English as its official language, and these guidelines are tailored accordingly. However, given our consortium's reach across 26+ European countries, many members will engage in communications and interactions using various national languages. It is imperative to prioritize gender-inclusive language across all the languages used within our community.

Please be mindful that different languages may present unique challenges when it comes to achieving gender inclusivity and neutrality, and certain concepts may inadvertently reinforce gendered assumptions. We strongly advise consulting appropriate language resources for guidance when communicating in languages other than English¹.

1. Gender-neutral language

The use of masculine nouns and pronouns as generics in English was standard practice until the 1970s, when feminist movements challenged it, uncovering inherent biases. Since then, feminist linguists have contributed to the wider adoption of gender-inclusive language to convey inclusion.

¹ A non-exhaustive bibliography is available in the appendix, including resources for other languages used in the EPOS countries. Please share any additional resources that could benefit others and are not listed there.



Different strategies can be adopted to go beyond gender-biased language. Gender-neutral language avoids specifying gender, aiming for general expressions to minimize assumptions about binary categories. In contrast, gender-inclusive language acknowledges and includes all gender identities, ensuring representation for non-binary and gender-diverse individuals. Both approaches share the goal of reducing bias, but they differ in their methods and focus, with gender-neutral language seeking universality and gender-inclusive language prioritizing diversity and representation.

In English, as well as in other languages, the use of the generic masculine nouns or forms to refer to both genders creates a gender bias. Writers should avoid gender-specific nouns and pronouns, as well as expressions that generalise the masculine form when making generic references to both men and women and, whenever possible, use a gender-neutral alternative.

Different strategies can be adopted to promote gender equality through language and use inclusive language forms:

- Omitting the masculine reference pronouns/adjectives.
- Using plural forms for nouns or reference words.
- Using they/them instead of the singular, gendered form (“singular they”).
- Using passive or imperative forms.

Avoid	Possible replacement strategies			
	Omit	Replace with plural form	Use the “singular they”	Use impersonal/passive forms
Each professor should send at least one of his students to the seminar.	Each professor should send at least one student to the seminar.	Professors should send at least one of their students to the seminar.	Each professor should send at least one of their students to the seminar.	At least one student per professor should attend the seminar.
A high-achieving researcher has an insatiable curiosity that drives him to push the boundaries of what is known.	A high-achieving researcher has an insatiable curiosity and is driven to push the boundaries of what is known.	High-achieving researchers have an insatiable curiosity that drives them to push the boundaries of what is known.	A high-achieving researcher has an insatiable curiosity that drives them to push the boundaries of what is known.	An insatiable curiosity drives a high-achieving researcher to push the boundaries of what is known.
Each student must submit his application no later than the end of the month.	Each student must submit the application no later than the end of the month.	Students must submit their application no later than the end of the month.	Each student must submit their application no later than the end of the month.	Student applications should be submitted no later than the end of the month.

It is important to always consider the text as whole and its nature when choosing among the different strategies. In particular, it is important to stress that gender-inclusive writing should not affect the readability of a text. For example, we should use the passive voice in moderation throughout a document to increase its clarity.



Also, some expressions may not be accepted everywhere, and writers should be mindful of this aspect when writing formal texts/documents. This is the case, for example, of the more recent use of the “singular they”.

Sometimes, writers may want to retain both feminine and masculine forms, either as separate words or through the use of slashes (e.g. he or she, she or he, he/she, she/he, s/he). Unless explicitly mentioning both genders is functional to the discussion, these options should be discouraged in favour of a gender-neutral approach, as both are more mindful of other gender identifications.

Additionally, this strategy has a negative impact on readability since retaining the two gendered pronouns or using slashes makes the text less immediate.

It is advisable to restrict its usage to very specific cases, such as filling in forms or addressing letterheads, or if a gender-neutral expression cannot be found.

Gender-inclusive language, or gender-neutral language, is language that avoids bias toward a particular sex or social gender and therefore is less likely to convey gender stereotypes. [UN Women guidelines]

1.1 Gender-neutral expressions

In most cases, there is no real need to generalise the masculine form when making generic references to both men and women since neutral terms are available in English. To maximise language inclusivity, writers should avoid gendered language and give preference to the gender-neutral version of a word.

Avoid	Prefer
Men, mankind	People, humanity, human beings, humankind
Chairman	Chair, chairperson, head
Guys (referred to men and women)	All, Everyone
Man-made disaster	Human-induced disaster
Steward, stewardess	Flight attendant
Freshman student	First-year student
Layman, common man	Layperson, average person
Boyfriend/girlfriend or husbands/wife	Partner, spouse

1.2 Gender-neutral or gender-sensitive: knowing when to use which

There is a difference between using a gender-neutral language that is respectful of all gender orientations and does not introduce stereotypes or presumptions connected to gender and having a gender-blind approach. In some cases, gender *is* part of the discussion and ignoring it is the linguistic equivalent of sweeping a problem under the rug. In these cases, it is instead important to use a gender-sensitive approach. For example, if there is a conversation regarding women’s safety or men’s mental health in the workplace, these conversations should be appropriately contextualized and addressing “people” or “employees” in general is not the most effective form of communication.



Gender-neutral language is particularly important in legal and policy documents, formal communication, public messaging, academic writing, and technology design, where inclusivity, fairness, and objectivity are paramount. It ensures that gender distinctions are avoided when irrelevant, such as in job descriptions or general audience communications. By using terms like "spouse" instead of "husband/wife" or "chairperson" instead of "chairman," gender-neutral language promotes equality, prevents bias, and ensures that all individuals, regardless of gender, are represented and included. This approach is essential for creating universal, non-discriminatory spaces and messages.

2. Gender identity and sexual orientation

Special attention should be paid to the use of vocabulary referring to gender identity and sexual orientation, roles and attributes, occupations, as well as to the use of titles. The language we use should be mindful and always recognize people's preferences in terms of gender identity.

When writing or talking with or about a transgender person, use nouns and pronouns consistent with the individual's gender identity, regardless of sex at birth. Pronouns preferred by that individual should be used and, whenever possible, people should be encouraged to make their preference known. Equally, using people's names in lieu of pronouns when possible is encouraged. Any text or script meant for publication regarding an employee should be reviewed and approved by the employee who is the subject of the text before publishing.

Avoid	Prefer
John is our Communications Specialist, and he is an avid skier. He and his boyfriend often like to spend the weekends in snowy places.	John (he/him) is the Communications Specialist on our team. Beyond keeping our comms process on track, John is an avid skier. Snowy places are a favourite place for John and his partner during the weekend.

Incorporating gender identifiers, such as "he/him, she/her and they/them," in communication is a crucial step toward fostering an inclusive environment. Here is why it matters:

- **Respect and Validation:** Using correct gender pronouns shows respect for an individual's identity and acknowledges their personal experiences.
- **Normalization and Visibility:** Including gender identifiers normalizes the conversation around gender diversity and makes it easier for individuals, especially those with non-binary or transgender identities, to be recognized.
- **Reducing Assumptions:** Using explicit identifiers prevents assuming someone's gender based on their name or appearance, which can lead to misgendering and alienation, ensuring more accurate and respectful communication.
- **Promoting Inclusivity:** This practice highlights the organization's commitment to inclusivity and diversity.
- **Enhancing Communication:** Clear communication about pronouns reduces confusion, fosters more respectful interactions, and workplace harmony and collaboration.



2.1 Stereotyping roles/attributes

Always refer to all genders without assuming stereotypical roles or attributes related to their gender. Typical examples include assuming that:

- A person in a job that is traditionally associated with a gender is that gender.
- A person will perform a chore because they are of a specific gender.
- A person will have a specific interest because they are of a specific gender.

Avoid	Prefer
Laura and Jim have both full time jobs, so he helps her with the household chores/taking care of the kids.	Laura and Jim have both full time jobs, so they share household chores and they both take care of the kids.
Maternal leave policies are as follows.	Parental leave policies are as follows.

2.1.1 Occupational Titles

With the exception of contexts where gender discrimination in occupations is highlighted and thus requires the use of gender-specific forms (see the earlier point of gender-sensitive language on this), as a general rule we should:

- Use a gender-neutral form (especially for professions that are still male-dominated, or those that are typically female-dominated).
- Avoid the unnecessary references to gender: adding “female”, “women” or “male” to generic neutral titles and terms should be avoided. (e.g., “female doctor”; “male caregiver”).

In some languages the titles of certain professional roles are associated with gender. This carry-over from language to real life is very socially apparent with these associations and this is most represented by *role incredulity* which is defined as: “a form of gender bias where women are mistakenly assumed to be in a support or stereotypically female role — an administrative assistant, nurse, wife, or girlfriend, for instance — rather than a leadership or stereotypically male role, such as CEO, professor, lawyer, doctor, or engineer.”² With this in mind, it can be helpful where possible to use equally descriptive role titles that don’t have historically gendered implicit meanings. For example, “Assistant to the Director” instead of “Secretary” or “Front Desk Coordinator” instead of “Receptionist”.

2.1.2 Personal Titles

Use courtesy titles that promote gender equality regardless of marital status. A woman’s marital status is almost always irrelevant to the matter at hand.

² **Harvard Business Review**, “When People Assume You’re Not in Charge Because You’re a Woman,” December 02, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/12/when-people-assume-youre-not-in-charge-because-youre-a-woman>.



Avoid	Prefer
Miss, Mrs.	Ms. (unless the woman herself prefers the courtesy title Mrs. or Miss) or, when applicable, Dr., Prof. etc that are more relevant to job-related discussion.

3. Not just Gender

The foundation of all respectful communication is empathy and consideration, ensuring that others feel comfortable and included. This principle applies not only to gender and sexual identity, but to all aspects of the individual. It is useful to adopt an intersectional approach, recognising that groups' and individuals' identities and perspectives result from unique combinations of discrimination and privilege.

Treating others as they wish to be treated fosters welcoming, transparent environments where egos are set aside, and respectful clarification is sought when necessary.

An important part of establishing a welcoming culture is not being defensive or argumentative when someone expresses that we made a mistake in referring to them.

Colleague: "I notice that you often point out the fact I am Jewish and that I follow a kosher diet at lunch. It makes me uncomfortable to be singled out and I'd prefer you not do that."	
Avoid	Prefer
But I tease everyone about what they eat! Even James is a vegetarian and I bring it up all the time!	I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable! I wasn't aware of how this was making you feel. I joke a lot about food and even tease myself in front of others but I recognize that I took it too far and I apologize.
Well maybe you misunderstood my intentions because I meant nothing serious by it. I didn't realize you were this sensitive about food and I apologize.	
I wouldn't care if you mentioned what I eat though! You could talk about how unhealthy my diet is if you want. Let's just move forward and forget about it.	

Defensive vs thoughtful language: an example of how to respond in a non-argumentative manner.

4. Empowering language

Inclusiveness in language is not only in the pronouns we use but also in the way we talk about people and to people. It is important to use a respectful and empowering language, preferring verbs and expressions that emphasize activity and do not make women (or any groups of people) a passive subject (e.g. invest in women in science Vs empower women in science). For the same reason, expressions that can be read as dismissive or diminutive of a person's experience and achievements should be avoided (e.g., using "girls" instead of "women", not using titles where appropriate).



5. Checking the language

It is important that the texts we are set to publish be reviewed with a gender inclusive lens. The following points provide guidance about aspects that we should consider when we review texts with diversity and inclusion in mind. A simple but effective strategy is to use an inclusive language checklist, an example of which is provided in the appendix.

5.1 Sensitivity Review

Have a diverse group of team members review the text for potential biases and insensitivity.

5.2 Check for Unconscious Bias

Be aware of unconscious bias when selecting descriptors or roles. It is possible to take implicit association tests to enhance our awareness about potential unconscious bias regarding a certain group.

- <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

5.3 Test Language

Run the text through gender-neutral and inclusive language tools to identify potential issues. Examples of free tools to test language against unconscious biases include:

- gender-decoder.katmatfield.com
- <https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/gender-bias-decoder/>
- <https://textanalysis.beapplied.com/>

6. Visual representation

For most people, sight is the primary sense and therefore the one that carries the most weight in our mental representation of the world. Graphical representation is a language in its own right, playing a role at least as important as written text in hindering or promoting gender equality. What we perceive can contribute to shaping what we think and influence decisions.

Authentic representation in images and videos fosters trust and connection with audiences, and this can be harnessed to reflect a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

It is important that when a communication product such as a news item, a post on social media, websites, campaigns and other public information are designed, authors keep in mind to use pictures and designs that:

- Avoid stereotypes (e.g., using pink as a color-code associated to women) and stereotypical roles (e.g., some jobs associated to male or female workers).
- Portray diversity of people engaged in different activities (presenting, teaching, executing an experiment).



6.1 Practical Tips for Inclusive Visual Communication

Audit Visual Content: Just like for written text, images and videos used for communication purposes should be regularly reviewed with a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)³ perspective. If needed, external diversity networks and experts can be involved to identify gaps and areas for improvement.

Be consistent: Integrate diverse visuals across all communications and foster the collaboration between communication and DEI people towards this end, which includes addressing accessibility needs.

Engage Diverse Creators: when commissioning publishing or visual communication works (e.g. designers, photographers or videomakers) engage with different content creators from diverse backgrounds if possible: it will be easier to capture nuanced and intersectional perspectives.

Use Authentic Images: Whenever possible, feature real people in everyday situations. Authentic images resonate more with audiences and avoid the pitfalls of stereotypes often found in staged photos. In this case, proper consent should be obtained from the individuals, confirming their understanding of how their images and stories will be used.

6.2 Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in event organisation

In the scientific world, events of all sorts (research conferences, education events, science fairs, exhibitions addressing the general public, science formats on TV or the web) are aimed at transferring the knowledge to scientific and non-scientific audiences. While this is the predominant aim, we should also be aware that these events also contribute to the way science is perceived. Hence these events have a relevance in the discussion of inclusive visual communication. To some extent, what we see on the stage can reinforce or challenge what we expect in real life and changing how we represent the world will also contribute to changing people's expectations. A representation of the world where all speakers are white, male, ostensibly heterosexual and middle-aged or older does not reflect the Solid Earth Science community in general and EPOS in particular. The EPOS community is rich, varied and diverse, and we celebrate this diversity. That's why, when selecting the speakers and chairs for an event we should strive to make sure this diversity is reflected in our choices by including in our events speakers from different genders, sexual identities, ages, career stages, ethnicities etc. Giving the floor to people with disabilities is also important, and we should not forget about accessibility requirements and empowerment in this case. With diversity as a driver, looking beyond the normal or conventional for speakers or experts opens us up to a greater list of qualified people who we may not have considered before.

Practical aspects to be considered:

- Avoid "manels" and all-male sessions.
- Look to potential speakers beyond the "usual suspects", also considering non-European and emerging economies.

³ For all practical purposes, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) are generally interchangeable. However the stress on Equality Vs Equity in EDI is more suitable to legal aspects (e.g. EU's 2010 equality act) than empowerment ones. In this document we prefer "DEI" since Inclusive Language Guidelines are more focussed on the recognition and representation of Diversity than to the enforcement of equality in a normative way.



- Provide opportunities for younger researchers to be speakers and members of panels and working groups.

6.3 Tips to organise more inclusive events

The choice of speakers is but one of many aspects of event organisation that can be looked at through the DEI lens, demonstrating our commitment to inclusivity. Here are some tips to organise events that feel more welcoming and inclusive for everyone:

- **Gather information on attendees' specific needs and preferences** during registration, solicit feedback after the event, and use the data to tailor future events to better meet the diverse needs of the audience.
- **Create a lineup that reflects a range of perspectives and backgrounds.** Diverse speakers bring valuable insights and enhance the richness of the event's content, fostering a more inclusive and engaging experience. This also applies to social events.
- **Select venues with comprehensive accessibility features** including ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, and seating areas. Prioritize creating an environment that goes beyond compliance to ensure all attendees feel welcome and included. If possible, include in the venue setting one or more quiet rooms to accommodate people who may feel overwhelmed and need to collect themselves for a moment.
- **Cater to diverse dietary needs** that accommodate different restrictions connected to religious, cultural, health and individual preferences.
- Consider financial assistance, such as **scholarships or reduced-fee tickets**, to participants from low-income backgrounds, particularly those from emerging economies or those with disabilities who may incur additional costs, (e.g. traveling with a caregiver).
- Develop a clear **inclusivity policy for the event** and share it with your team, vendors, and attendees to set expectations and promote a positive, welcoming atmosphere for everyone. This must include a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination, harassment, or offensive behaviour. It is a good idea to designate one or more persons in the team as contact persons for people who need support or want to report a breach in the policy.
- Inclusiveness should be the norm, and all staff should be expected to **handle sensitive situations with empathy and professionalism.**

6.4 Resources and additional tips for communicating in a gender-sensitive way

The UN Women gender-sensitive lexicon can be used as a key reference. The lexicon includes 600+ terms drawn from UN and UN Women literature. It helps enable consistent use of gender-sensitive terminology as well as to clarify possible doubts.



Bibliography

Anne Pauwels (2003). *Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism*. In: The Handbook and Language of Gender, Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff eds., Blackwell Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756942.ch24>

UN Women online resources <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/genderterm> (in particular the Gender-inclusive language guidelines (English) - Promoting gender equality through the use of language)

UN toolkit for gender-inclusive language
<https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml>

Council of Europe Guidelines for the use of language as a driver of inclusivity
<https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-for-the-use-of-language-as-a-driver-of-inclusivity/1680aec235#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20Use%20gender%2Dneutral%20words,terms%20depending%20on%20the%20context.>

European Parliament - Inclusive language guidelines
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/contracts-and-grants/files/grants/media-and-events/en-annex-9-inclusive-communication-guidelines-of-the-european-parliament.pdf>

Gender-Neutral language in the European Parliament
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf

APA – American Psychological Association - Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion - Inclusive Language Guide, second edition.
<https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guide.pdf>

EIGE – European Institute for Gender Equality: Toolkit on Gender-sensitive Communication
https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/toolkit-gender-sensitive-communication?language_content_entity=en

CITI | GETTYS DEI toolkit
<https://custom.gettyimages.com/deitoolkit/p/2>



APPENDIX

Checklist for gender-related revisions in written texts

When reviewing a text, the following are some of the questions that a writer should ask themselves:

1. Does the text contain any gender-specific expressions that could have been replaced with gender-neutral ones? For instance, does the text use the words “man” or “men” (used as single words or in compound words to refer to people who may not be men?)
 - a. **Do:** Use gender-neutral alternatives.
 - i. ☒ “Chairperson” or “Chair” instead of “Chairman”.
 - ii. ☒ “Humankind” instead of “Mankind”.
 - iii. ☒ “Artificial” or “synthetic” instead of “man-made”.
 - b. **Do Not:** Use expressions that unnecessarily specify a gender when referring to people generally.
 - i. ☒ “Each employee must report to his manager.”
 - ii. ☒ “Man the station while I’m gone.”
 - iii. ☒ “The best man for the job...”
2. Does the text contain the use of masculine forms in generic references, i.e. when referring to an unspecified group of people?
 - a. **Do:** Use plural forms or neutral terms to avoid defaulting to masculine pronouns.
 - i. ☒ “Employees must submit their reports on time.”
 - ii. ☒ “A person should keep their workspace clean.”
 - iii. ☒ “Each applicant must submit their credentials.”
 - b. **Do Not:** Use masculine pronouns (he, him, his) to refer to people of unspecified gender.
 - i. ☒ “A doctor must listen to his patients.”
 - ii. ☒ “Each student must hand in his homework.”
 - iii. ☒ “If anyone calls, tell him I’ll call back.”
3. Does the text adopt any occupational or other gender stereotypes?
 - a. **Do:** Represent roles and behaviors in a way that doesn't imply gender norms or stereotypes.
 - i. ☒ “The nurse explained the diagnosis, and the engineer designed the solution,” without implying specific genders.
 - ii. ☒ “Parents, regardless of gender, should be involved in their children’s education.”



- b. **Do Not:** Associate certain jobs, behaviors, or roles with specific genders.
 - i. ✗ “The doctor gave his instructions to the pretty young nurse.”
 - ii. ✗ “A secretary must be polite and wear makeup.”
 - iii. ✗ “Firemen are brave and strong.”
- 4. Does the text contain unnecessary references to sex or gender?
 - a. **Do:** Omit references to sex or gender unless directly relevant.
 - i. ✓ “The candidate has 10 years of experience in geosciences.”
 - ii. ✓ “The applicant has an impressive academic record.”
 - b. **Do Not:** Mention gender or physical appearance when it is irrelevant.
 - i. ✗ “The female engineer presented the solution.”
 - ii. ✗ “The handsome male lawyer arrived late.”
 - iii. ✗ “She’s quite competent for a woman.”
- 5. Does the text include the same kinds of information when referring to people of different genders?
 - a. **Do:** Ensure equal treatment when describing individuals of different genders.
 - i. ✓ “John Smith, PhD in Physics, is an expert in volcanology. Mary Jones, MSc in Geochemistry, is a seismology researcher.”
 - ii. ✓ “Mr. Taylor and Ms. Singh will both present their work at the symposium.”
 - b. **Do Not:** Include professional achievements for one gender but only personal details for another.
 - i. ✗ “Dr. Robert Lee, a renowned climatologist. Susan, a mother of three, works in meteorology.”
 - ii. ✗ “Mr. Thomas leads the research team. Mrs. Clara is a charming woman who assists with logistics.”

