ASME GUIDE FOR REDUCING BIAS IN LANGUAGE

ASME is a not-for-profit membership organization that enables collaboration, knowledge sharing, career enrichment, and skills development across all engineering disciplines, toward a goal of helping the global engineering community develop solutions to benefit lives and livelihoods. Founded in 1880 by a small group of leading industrialists, ASME has grown through the decades to include more than 100,000 members in 140+ countries.

At ASME, we are committed to a culture of mutual respect that values difference, creates space for diversity, promotes equity, and recognizes intersectionality. Many of us are sometimes unaware of the effect that our language has on those around us. The goal of this guide is to be a resource to help ASME members communicate more effectively to a wide variety of audiences.

Executive Summary

The guidelines presented herein are intended to encourage respectful and considerate communication between ASME members and all people. As a rule, we want to use terminology of inclusion. When referring to people it is always the best choice to use the terms they prefer or would use themselves. In general, treat and talk to people the way they want to be treated.

This guide includes sections on:

- **Microaggressions.** These are statements or actions that perpetuate indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. This guide will help you avoid many types of microaggressions. (Page 2)

- **Gender.** It is important to use inclusive language when talking about gender. Gender is a social identity and should not be assumed to be binary. (Page 3)

- **Sexual Orientation and Identity.** It is important to be inclusive and avoid assumptions about people's sexual orientation and identity. (Page 4)

- **Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin.** We should use appropriate and accurate descriptors when talking about race, ethnicity, and national origin, and avoid stereotypes. (Page 5-6)

- **Ability.** When mentioning a person's disability, we should use their preferred terminology, whether its person-first or identity-first. (Page 7)

- **Age.** It's important to be respectful of our colleagues, whatever their age. (Page 8)

- **Other topics**, including Pregnancy and Appearance. (Page 9)

More information on each of these and specific examples can be found in the following pages.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Microaggressions	Microaggressions are statements or actions that perpetuate indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group.	• Don't bring up native language, ethnicity, or national origin unless its relevant and you've built trust.	• Avoid making assumptions about people's native language, ethnicity, and country of origin, e.g., "You speak English so well" to an Asian-American, presuming it's not their native language.
Microinsults	Actions or comments that demean a person's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability or religious identity. These are often unintentional, but the effects on the receiving end are real.	• Ask people how to pronounce and spell their names, and practice if you need to say it aloud.	• Microinsults can be insensitive or inconsiderate, e.g. "Your name is so strange" • They can also be masked as compliments, e.g. "Asians always do well in school"
Microinvalidations	Comments or behaviors that discount, question or diminish the thoughts, feelings, worldview or reality of the recipient.	• Practice empathy to understand the life experiences of others. If you don't understand, ask. • Recognize difference and diversity of experience, and look for the value this difference brings.	• Avoid statements such as "You're overreacting" or "You're too sensitive." • Avoid minimizing or distorting the existence of racism, sexism, heterosexism, or suggesting that race and gender do not matter, e.g., "We're all the same"

GENDER

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Gendered nouns	Inclusive nouns should be favored over gendered nouns.	• Humankind, humanity, humans • Chair, Chairperson	• Mankind • Chairman
Generic use of gendered pronouns	Inclusive pronouns should be favored.	• Every member should provide their address • All members should provide their addresses	• Every member should provide his address
Conflating sex and gender	Gender is a social identity. Sex refers to biological sex assignment at birth.	• Use the word gender, which is inclusive of a range of gender identities	• Unless discussing biological sex assignment at birth, avoid using the word sex.
Use of sex terms when talking about gender	Male and female are sex determiners, not gender pronouns.	• Non-gendered terms (e.g., people, adults, individuals) should be used when talking about broad groups. • Gender terms (e.g., women, men, girls, boys) should be used where relevant. • Sex determiners can be used as adjectives when relevant (e.g., the age range is broad or ambiguous and everyone identifies as male or female).	• Sex determiners (e.g., male, female) should not be used as nouns.
Binary terms and constructions	These imply a binary nature of gender and exclude individuals who do not use these pronouns.	• Use the singular "they" or adjust construction to use a plural "they" • Use gender inclusive terms, ("the individual agrees to the terms" or "the people who participated enjoyed themselves")	• Avoid using binary constructions (e.g., "he or she," "she or he," "he/she," and "(s)he") • Avoid constructions that assume binarism ("the men and women who participated enjoyed themselves")
Age and gender terms	Different terms are used for individuals of different ages, and these terms are often gendered.	• "Girl" is an acceptable term when referring to school-age girls. • "Woman" should be used for those in college or older.	• The term "girl" should not be used for college-age or older women (the same goes for boy, though this usage is less common)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION & IDENTITY

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Terms for the LGBTQ+ community and its members	LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning), and others. The "plus" represents other sexual identities. The first four letters of the acronym have been used since the 1990s, but in recent years there has been an increased awareness of the need to be inclusive of other sexual identities to offer better representation.	• When referring to the broad community, use the abbreviation "LGBTQ+" • When referring to people or groups within the LGBTQ+ community, use specific, identity-first terms to describe people's sexual orientation (e.g., bisexual people, gay men, lesbians) • When using specific terms for orientations, define them if there is ambiguity (e.g., "gay" can be interpreted broadly, to include all genders, or more narrowly, to include only men)	• Avoid using "homosexual" and "homosexuality," which are associated with negative stereotypes
Use of the term queer	Queer was historically and still is sometimes used as a derogatory term. However, it is also the term some people feel best describes their identity, and is most often used today with this positive connotation.	• It is acceptable to use "queer" for people who identify as queer • It is acceptable to use "queer" as a term of inclusion (e.g., as the Q in LGBTQ+) or when referring to the community that identifies as queer	• Avoid using "queer" when describing particular people or a group of people unless you know they identify as queer
Assumptions about sexual orientation	Be careful about statements that make implicit assumptions about someone's sexual orientation.	• Focus the conversation on the person without making assumptions • If you have a reason to bring it up (e.g., to extend an invitation), use terms such as "partner," "spouse," or "guest"	• Avoid making assumptions about the gender of someone's partner

RACE & ETHNICITY

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Group nouns for mixed-race groups	As we strive to advance diversity, there are times when we will need to use language to refer to or describe groups of people based on race and/or ethnicity and/or national origin. We want to do this appropriately and respectfully.	• BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) • Underrepresented groups, or members of underrepresented groups. • If a distinction is needed between the dominant racial group and nondominant racial groups, use a modifier (e.g., "ethnic," "racial") when using the word "minority" (e.g., ethnic minority, racial minority, racial-ethnic minority). • When possible, use the specific name of the group or groups to which you are referring.	• Avoid using "minority" or "minorities" as a noun • Avoid using the term "non-white," which centers whiteness
Appropriate and accurate racial and ethnic descriptors	As we strive to advance diversity, there are times when we will need to use language to refer to or describe groups of people based on race and/or ethnicity and/or national origin. We want to do this appropriately and respectfully.	• There are Indigenous people all over the world; the terms they use to describe themselves vary regionally. • When writing about Indigenous Peoples, use the names they call themselves. • In North America, the collective terms "Native American" and "Native North American" are acceptable (and may be preferred to "American Indian") • Specify the nation or people if possible (e.g., Cherokee, Navajo, Sioux)	• "Indian" should not be used to describe Native Americans; it usually refers to people from India.
		• "Black" is preferable to "African American" to describe people from various national origins (e.g., Ghana and Jamaica) • "African American" is appropriate when talking specifically about Americans of African Descent	• "African American" should not be used as a catch-all term for people of African descent because it excludes non-Americans • "Afro-American" is an outdated term and is generally inappropriate

		• "Asian" should be used for people from Asia • "Asian American" should be used for Americans of Asian descent • Or use specific national or ethnic origin when possible	• The term "Oriental" should not be used to describe people
		• "Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine/Latin@" are usually used to describe people from Latin America or of Latin American descent ("o" and "a" are gendered endings in Spanish; x, e, @ are used to be gender inclusive) • "Hispanic" is usually used to describe people from Spanish-speaking countries • Use specific national or ethnic origin when possible	• Avoid using non-specific terms when talking about people of Hispanic or Latino descent
		• For people of Middle Eastern and North African descent, use the nation of origin (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel) when possible • "Arab American" is acceptable for people who self-identify as such	• Avoid using "Arab" as a catch-all term for people from the Middle East and North Africa, some of whom are not ethnically Arab
		• Use "White" or "European American" • Or use specific national or ethnic origin, when possible	• The term "Caucasian" should be avoided because it originated as a way of classifying White people as a race to be favorably compared with other races
		• Focus the conversation on the person without making assumptions based on their national origin, or presumed national origin	• Avoid reproducing stereotypes or making assumptions related to people's country of origin
National origin	As we strive to advance diversity, there are times when we will need to use language to refer to or describe groups of people based on race and/or ethnicity and/or national origin. We want to do this appropriately and respectfully.	• Focus the conversation on the person without making assumptions based on their national origin, or presumed national origin	• Avoid reproducing stereotypes or making assumptions related to people's country of origin

ABILITY

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Relevance	In general, you should only mention disabilities when they are relevant in context	• When mentioning a person's disability, use their preferred terminology	• Avoid mentioning a person's disability when it is incidental to the topic at hand
Person first language vs. Identity first language	Person first language puts personhood first (e.g., person with a disability) Identity first language puts the identity first (e.g., disabled person). Both are broadly acceptable. The best choice is to use the preferred language of the person or people you are describing. In the absence of other information, you should usually opt for person first language.	• Descriptive person first terms (e.g., person with a disability, person with a mental illness, people with intellectual disabilities, child with a birth impairment, person with a physical disability) • Identity first terms can also be used (e.g., disabled person, blind person) • According to the National Association of the Deaf most Deaf people culturally prefer to be called Deaf (capitalized) rather than "hearing-impaired," "people with hearing loss," etc.	• Don't use pejorative or condescending terms or euphemisms (e.g., special needs, physically challenged, mentally challenged, mentally retarded, mentally ill)
Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity refers to variation in the brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions.	• Generally speaking, it's appropriate to use the terms "neurodiversity," "neurotypical," and "neuroatypical" • Some people may identify as Autistic or "on the spectrum," but it's best not to use these terms unless you know the person you're describing self-identifies this way.	• Avoid making assumptions about people's mental functions or conditions.

AGE

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Terms for older adults	Be as clear and descriptive as possible when referring to groups of people by age	• "Older adults" or "older people" are acceptable generic terms • When talking about specific groups, be specific (e.g., persons 65 years and older, people between the ages of 65 and 75, octogenarians)	• Terms like "elderly," "aged," and "seniors/senior citizens" can be unclear and may perpetuate stereotypes
Terms for younger adults	Be respectful of young people and treat them as adults and equals	• Be descriptive; use terms like "college students" or "early career professionals"	• Avoid using "kids" or other youthful descriptors for adults
Generational stereotypes	Be careful about statements that make implicit assumptions about someone's generation.	• Focus the conversation on the person without making assumptions based on their age	• Avoid reproducing stereotypes or making assumptions related to people's age or generation

OTHER TOPICS

ISSUE	EXPLANATION	BEST PRACTICE	USE CAUTION
Pregnancy, Reproduction, Fertility, and Parenthood	A person's reproductive status is confidential.	• Wait for someone to tell you their status or intentions related to pregnancy, reproduction, fertility, or parenthood.	• Don't make assumptions about people's status or intentions related to pregnancy, reproduction, fertility, or parenthood. • Avoid making comments about the number of children a person has
Appearance	Comments on appearance, even those intended as compliments, can cause discomfort and potentially undermine a person's sense of professionalism. For example, women are often praised for their looks over their ideas.	• Keep professional interactions professional, focused on ideas rather than personal traits or characteristics	• Be cautious when making comments on appearance, or avoid them altogether
Education	Reflect on biases you may have related to level of education, degree achieved, school attended, or country where education was received	• Recognize that a diversity of backgrounds contributes to the success of an organization • Keep professional interactions professional, focused on ideas and contributions	• Avoid making assumptions about people based on their level of education, degree achieved, school attended, or country where education was received
Socio-Economic Status	Be aware that people have a diversity of experience and come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Not everyone who ends up in engineering comes from the same social class or background.	• Recognize that a diversity of backgrounds contributes to the success of an organization • Keep professional interactions professional, focused on ideas • Wait for someone to tell you their status	• Avoid making assumptions about people's current or past socio-economic status