

APA Guidelines: Reducing Bias in Language

Researchers working in APA Style often study diverse populations, some of whom are vulnerable to stereotyping through biased language. To support equity and respect in communication, APA provides specific guidelines to reduce bias in writing, particularly in reference to race, disability, gender, and sexuality.

Adjusting Labels

Avoid labels whenever possible. However, when it is necessary to describe your research population, do so respectfully and with precision. For example, always use terms that individuals use to describe themselves. Avoid contrasting groups in a way that implies one is the standard or norm, such as referring to people without disabilities as “normal.” Be thoughtful about how terminology may be perceived by your audience, particularly those belonging to the referenced groups.

Refer to these APA resources for deeper guidance:

- Disabilities: Removing Bias in Language
- Race & Ethnicity: Removing Bias in Language
- Sex and Gender: Removing Bias in Language

Avoiding Gendered Pronouns

When referring to people in general (rather than specific individuals), avoid defaulting to gendered pronouns like “he,” “his,” or “men.” These forms can reinforce outdated norms and distract readers.

Rather than using awkward constructions like “he or she” or “s/he,” APA recommends:

- Rewriting the sentence for clarity
- Using plural forms: “they” or “their”
- Using an article (e.g., “the”)
- Omitting the pronoun altogether
- Using specific nouns like “individual,” “participant,” or “person”

For more, refer to OWL’s guidelines on gender-inclusive writing.

Using Alternative Descriptors

The design of your research can inform your descriptive language. For example, categorize participants based on meaningful measures like test results rather than subjective labels.

Example: Instead of “slow participants” and “fast participants,” use “participants with slower reaction times” and “participants with faster reaction times.”

Additionally, choose adjectives instead of labels to describe populations. Phrases like “the elderly” or “the schizophrenics” strip individuals of their humanity. Prefer phrases like “elderly adults,” “patients with schizophrenia,” or “individuals diagnosed with amnesia.”

This approach supports respectful, precise, and professional communication in scholarly work.