Bocconi

INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES



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Introduction

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*

Bocconi University is a place where Italian, European[1] and international guidelines that promote non-discriminatory and inclusive communication can flourish and prosper, first and foremost at an institutional level. In this sense, the University is key in promoting more inclusive language and using it in a way that recognizes and reflects diversity while limiting unconscious prejudices.

We are privileged to work and study in a multicultural and multilingual environment, where the fundamental principles of the Italian Constitution are translated into concrete actions that foster the full development of every person, and ensure equal dignity, respect and opportunities[2].

As a community and an institute of higher education, the University must not only impart academic knowledge, but also — and most importantly — put into practice the values of inclusion and respect we all believe in, ensuring they take root in everyday culture and habits. By leading by example in our own environment, we can actively contribute to building the open and inclusive society we all want to live in.

This is the basis of these guidelines on inclusive communication. Intended as a useful tool for the entire University community — faculty, staff and students — these guidelines offer recommendations, practical advice, and concrete examples to support the use of language that is non-discriminatory and respectful of diversity in both written communication (emails, documentation, web pages, etc.) and verbal communication (meetings, seminars, lectures, conferences, etc.).

Note on examples: The example sentences and suggested alternatives in these guidelines illustrate language choices. They should not be interpreted as descriptions or assessments of actual situations, policies or practices at Bocconi University or any other institution.

Inclusive language springs from the realization that a person is not defined by one of their characteristics, and that a characteristic is not what defines the entirety of a person. This document is intended to support this approach by helping us understand how our choice of words, tone and behavior can influence the way other people see us, and how we can adapt our communication to be more aware of and empathetic toward different identities, cultures and abilities. It is neither comprehensive nor definitive, but rather a helpful resource that can guide our daily interactions.

The document is structured around the main themes of inclusivity, covering key areas including: gender; LGBTQIA+; race and ethnicity; and disability and learning disorders. It is complemented by additional reflections on other aspects of diversity, along with guidance on inclusive visual representations and a glossary of key terms.

The guidelines and recommendations presented in this document regarding inclusive language are based on current knowledge and recognized linguistic practices at the time of republication (October 2026). Language is dynamic and subject to social, cultural, technological and political changes, so this guide may undergo revisions and updates over time.

[1] European Commission, Guidelines for Inclusive Communication; United Nations, Guidelines for Gender-Inclusive Language

[2] Art. 3 of the The Constitution of the Italian Republic: "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction based on sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, or personal and social conditions. (...)"

Gender

We need to be aware of how gender-sensitive language can be used to include all the people we want to communicate with. Avoid nouns that appear to assume that one gender rather than another will perform a particular role.

Examples:

- "A good researcher takes his job very seriously" should be replaced with "A good researcher takes the job very seriously"
- "A professor must communicate clearly with her students" should be replaced with "A professor must communicate clearly with students"
- "The average student is worried about his or her grade" should be replaced with "The average student is worried about grades"

Also refrain from the use of gendered words. Some habitual terms can easily be made more inclusive, such as gendered nouns.

Examples:

- "The department chairman will present the new policy" should be replaced with "The department chair will present the new policy"
- "The university is seeking businessmen" should be replaced with "The university is seeking business professionals"
- "Ladies and gentlemen" should be replaced with "Everyone" or "colleagues"

Use the singular, gender-specific terms "alumna" and "alumnus" when referring to a former student and graduate. For the plural form, "alumni" is widely used as a gender-neutral plural in many English-speaking countries.

Avoid always mentioning the same gender first in the word order, or addressing men and women differently (e.g. a man by family name, a woman by first name). Also be careful not to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, or portray harmful stereotypes around gender, age, ethnic groups, etc. in your communication.

Example:

- "Professors with their wives" should be replaced with "Professors with their partners"

Try not to patronize, victimize or minimize women, or ignore their contributions. Gender-sensitive language treats different genders equally and positively; it is aware of stereotypical perceptions of gender roles and is used actively to undo them.

Example:

- "Participants are eligible to apply for the program. Female participants are also eligible" should be replaced with "All participants are eligible to apply for the program"

Use the passive or imperative form of the sentence to omit the person's gender.

Examples:

- Instead of "The student should upload his/her documentation" you should use "The documentation should be uploaded"
- Instead of "The candidate should upload his CV on the platform" you should use "Please upload your CV on the platform"

Pronouns

In our daily communication (whether during meetings or in writing), pronouns play a crucial role in referring to individuals. When we write about or address someone, we should use the pronouns they use for themselves. If their pronouns are not known, respectfully ask which pronouns they currently prefer, recognizing that these may evolve over time.

It is preferable not to assume someone's gender or pronouns based on their name, appearance or any other factor. When a person's pronouns are unknown, or when gender is irrelevant, the singular "they" (with "them/their/theirs") can be used as a gender-neutral pronoun in inclusive English. It should also be used when these are the pronouns a person uses for themselves. Using "they" to refer to one person has a long history in English, but its use for non-binary people is more recent and is now widely recognized as an inclusive language practice. Where suitable, sentences can also be reformulated so that no pronoun is needed at all.

Examples:

- "The Chapter Leader is responsible for organizing events. He/she is also in charge of the Chapter's budget" should be replaced with "The Chapter Leader is responsible for organizing events. They are also in charge of the Chapter's budget"
- "The scholarship recipient has not yet been announced, but we will reveal her/his identity later this month" should be replaced with "The scholarship recipient has not yet been announced, but we will reveal their identity later this month"
- "Each student should pick up his/her package" should be replaced with "Each student should pick up their package"

For more formal writing including legal or bureaucratic communication, it is best to be as clear as possible and use the pronouns a person uses for themselves, including gender-specific pronouns ("she/her/hers" or "he/him/his") where known and appropriate. Where a pronoun could create ambiguity, repeat the person's name or role, or rephrase the sentence to ensure clarity.

Titles

Whenever appropriate, use a person's full name instead of gendered courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., Mx.). Professional titles such as Professor or Doctor should be used where relevant and in accordance with institutional practice.

When referring to women, avoid the titles Miss or Mrs., which unnecessarily disclose their marital status, unless they prefer to self-identify as such. Use Ms. instead.

When referring to people who identify outside the gender binary, use Mx. if it is the person's preferred title. If their preferred title is unknown, refrain from making assumptions and use the person's full name instead.

Example:

- "Miss/Mrs. Smith" should be replaced with "Ms. Smith"

Events

In promoting events, it is important to list the speakers in order of appearance or in alphabetical order, including both male and female speakers, using their appropriate titles based on their gender.

Forms

Forms, both paper and online, represent a specific type of document. Gender information should be collected only when strictly necessary with four options offered:

- Female

- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

If useful for data collection purposes, next to the "Other" option, a free-text field can be added to allow the form filler to specify further.

If, for legal reasons, it is necessary to request a person's sex, currently only the choices of male and female should be indicated. This option is tied to an objective need (such as quotas reserved for a gender or statistical requirements).

If the form includes a contact option, it is useful to ask for the preferred form of address, among:

- She, her, hers, herself
- He, him, his, himself
- They, them, theirs, themself or themselves

Alternatively, the titles can be used:

- Ms.
- Mr.
- Mx.

Gender-Neutral Nouns

Gendered	Gender-Neutral nouns
Man	Person, individual
Mankind	People, human beings, humanity
Freshman	First-year student
Man-made	Machine-made, synthetic, artificial
The common man	The average person
Chairman	Chair, chairperson
Ombudsman	Ombudsperson
Businessman	Business person (plural: business people)/professional
Spokesman	Spokesperson
Sportsman/Sportswoman	Student athlete
Sir (in "Dear Sir," etc.)	Dear Member(s) of the Committee, To Whom it May Concern
Ladies and Gentlemen	Everyone, Colleagues, Members of the Community

Gendered	Gender-Neutral nouns
Mother/father	Parent or guardian
Husband/wife	Partner

LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning, intersex and asexual. The "+" symbol includes all identities, orientations and experiences not explicitly represented by the letters in the acronym and highlights the diversity and plurality of the community. In some cases, shorter versions of the acronym are used, such as LGBTQ+.

As a general principle of LGBTQIA+ inclusive communication, do not assume anyone's sexual

orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics. You should always emphasize the person rather than fragmented characteristics — such as their sexual orientation, gender identity, and racial or ethnic origin — and strive to respect self-identification.

Examples:

- "Gays and lesbians are now allowed to marry in many EU countries" should be replaced with "Same-sex couples are now allowed to marry or have registered partnerships in many EU countries"
- "A gay, two lesbians" should be replaced with "A gay person, a lesbian couple"
- "Transgenders" as a noun should be replaced with "Trans people/person"

Avoid using the adjective "transgendered," and instead opt for "trans" as it is all-encompassing.

Additionally, the term "homosexual" is linguistically correct, although today it is generally discouraged when referring to people, particularly when used as a noun.

Race and Ethnicity

Language relating to race and ethnicity is continuously evolving, therefore it is necessary to make sure that we use the most accurate and appropriate terms. Although it always depends on context, the basic principle in this area is to use these terms carefully and avoid grouping people by racial or ethnic origin, unless absolutely necessary.

Some common terms related to ethnicities and minority groups need further, yet not exhaustive, clarification.

Use:

- "People of Color" (POC) where appropriate to the context and audience. This term is widely used in the US, and is gaining prevalence in the UK as a more positive term over the acronym BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic), which has not been used by the UK government since March 2021 as it excludes mixed, other and white ethnic minority groups. The exception is when the use of BAME becomes appropriate for statistical comparisons or research purposes (e.g. BAME populations are generally underrepresented in research studies)
- "Black person/people/community", never "black" as a noun. Capitalizing "black" became widespread in US journalism and academia in 2020 to signal the shared cultural identity of Black Americans, a shift that has since spread to other English-speaking countries. Some style guides and writers prefer lowercase "black" to emphasize a broader, non-national or descriptive use of the term, or for consistency with "white". At Bocconi, we urge writers and editors to consider the context and type of communication when deciding whether to capitalize or not
- "White" as an adjective, never as a noun
- Terms that are specific as possible when referring to a person's ethnicity, nationality or geographic origin (e.g. "visitors from Japan and South Korea" rather than "Asian visitors")
- The words "community" or simply "people" where appropriate, rather than "minority," unless referring specifically to the numerical size of a group

Avoid:

- Broad racial or ethnic labels when a more precise description is available
- The term "Caucasian"; use "white" instead
- "Non-white" as a general category unless the comparison with "white" is directly relevant. Otherwise, as noted above, it is more accurate to specify the race or ethnicity of a person or group

When referring to an individual, respect the language they use to describe their own identity. Rather than assigning labels, politely ask — whenever appropriate — how they prefer to be described since divergences may even exist within ethnic groups.

Disability and Learning Disorders

A disability is a permanent or temporary condition that people can be born with or acquire in the course of their lives. A person with one or more disabilities is not defined by their disability. They are first and foremost people, so we recommend using person-first language that emphasizes the person rather than the disability.

Avoid pity and negative phrases that present people with disabilities as victims, such as "suffering from mental illness," "confined to a wheelchair," or "has a birth defect." Also refrain from the use of collective nouns as they unnecessarily create a distance.

Examples:

- Instead of "A disabled person" you should use "A person with disabilities/a disability"
- Instead of "Wheelchair-bound" you should use "Wheelchair user"
- Instead of "Normal people" you should use "People without disabilities"
- Instead of "Affected by Down's syndrome" you should use "With Down's syndrome"
- Instead of "The deaf/the blind" you should use "People with hearing/visual impairments" or "people who are deaf/blind"

The same logic may be applied to services dedicated to people with disabilities. You should avoid terms like "Toilets/elevators for the disabled" and opt for "Accessible toilets/elevators."

Similarly, when referring to people with specific learning disorders (SLDs), focus on the person and not on their specific needs.

Examples:

- Instead of "A dyslexic" you should use "Person with dyslexia"
- Instead of "SLD student" you should use "Student with an SLD" or "student with a specific learning disorder"
- Instead of "Student suffering from dyscalculia" you should use "Student with dyscalculia"

Other Aspects of Diversity

There are also other aspects of diversity that should be considered when using inclusive language, including age, religion and belief, and socioeconomic status. In any case, it is best to reject language that perpetuates stereotypes or reinforces prejudices.

Examples:

- Avoid expressions including “the elderly,” “seniors” and “old person/people.” Instead, opt for terms such as “older person/people” or “older adults.” Terms such as “adults over 65” or “people 21 and older” may be used where age is relevant to the context. Along the same lines, opt for “younger person” or “young people” over “youths” or “juveniles”
- Avoid expressions that reinforce age-related stereotypes. For example, use the term “experienced workforce” rather than “mature workforce” or “student/colleague in the office” rather than “boy/girl in the office”
- Although Bocconi’s academic schedule follows the Italian holiday schedule — many of which are rooted in Catholic tradition — we should respect people of all faiths and beliefs, including those with no religious affiliation. We should also try to avoid making assumptions about anyone’s religion, especially when addressing diverse audiences. For example, the December staff gathering is inclusively named “Holiday Greetings,” a choice that does not exclude references to Christmas in contexts where it is relevant
- Opt for person-centered expressions such as “Christian person,” “Muslim community” or “Jewish people” rather than broad labels such as “Christians,” “Muslims” or “Jews”
- When referring to someone’s socioeconomic status, aim for neutral and accurate language. For example, rather than “poor/deprived students,” use “lower-income students.” Similarly, rather than expressions such as “first/third world,” opt for “Global North/South” or “high/middle/low-income countries.” The phrase “developing/developed countries” can be used in certain contexts such as in academic research

Lastly, considering the international and intercultural context of the University, it is important to adopt inclusive language also when referring to international students with migration backgrounds. Choose specific terms and expressions such as “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” “undocumented migrant,” “internally displaced person/people,” or “people experiencing social/political/economic exclusion” rather than inaccurate or stigmatizing ones such as “illegal migrant” or “alien.”

Inclusive Icons, Images and Representations

Inclusive communication also concerns visual language: photographs, videos, icons, illustrations, infographics and other visual elements that help shape how people, roles and communities are represented. These images are a powerful way to show the diversity of Bocconi's community, and should always reflect our core values.

It is important to choose visual content that does not reinforce stereotypes or implicit hierarchies related to gender identity, sexual orientation, age, nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, socioeconomic background, professional role, or personal circumstances.

Colors, posture, facial expressions, spatial positioning, relative prominence of individuals, and gender representation can also convey implicit messages. For this reason, it is useful to ensure that images represent people in a balanced and dignified way.

Examples:

- Instead of portraying only men in leadership positions and women in welcoming or supporting roles, use images that reflect diversity across roles, responsibilities and positions of authority
- Instead of depicting international students through cultural stereotypes, use images that portray people from different backgrounds interacting naturally in academic and campus settings
- Instead of relying on colors or icons that reinforce gender stereotypes (e.g. pink for women and blue for men) choose colors and symbols that are not rigidly associated with gender
- Instead of representing people with disabilities only through their disability, use images that portray them in a variety of roles, such as students, faculty or participants in university life

Short Glossary

Gender expression: These are the ways in which everyone expresses their gender identity in a given culture and era (e.g. physical characteristics, behavior or roles).

Gender identity: This is the sense of belonging to a gender. If gender coincides with biological sex, it is called “cisgender,” otherwise it is called “transgender.” When a person is not comfortable with the male/female binary, feels both or none, they may choose to define themselves with the term “non-binary.”

Sexual orientation: Indicates attraction to a person of the opposite sex or gender, same sex or gender, or both.

Race: Frequently used to categorize individuals based on physical characteristics that are considered common among people of a shared ancestry, such as skin color or hair texture.

Ethnicity: Refers to shared cultural expressions within a group of people, such as religion, traditions and customs.

Nationality: Pertains to a person's citizenship acquired through descent or naturalization.

Conclusion

These guidelines are intended as a practical resource to support our daily communication and to encourage continuous reflection on the impact of language. Together, through small but meaningful choices, we can help strengthen a culture of inclusion and respect across the Bocconi community.

This document was written with the contribution of:

- Corporate Marketing & Communication
- Inclusion Service