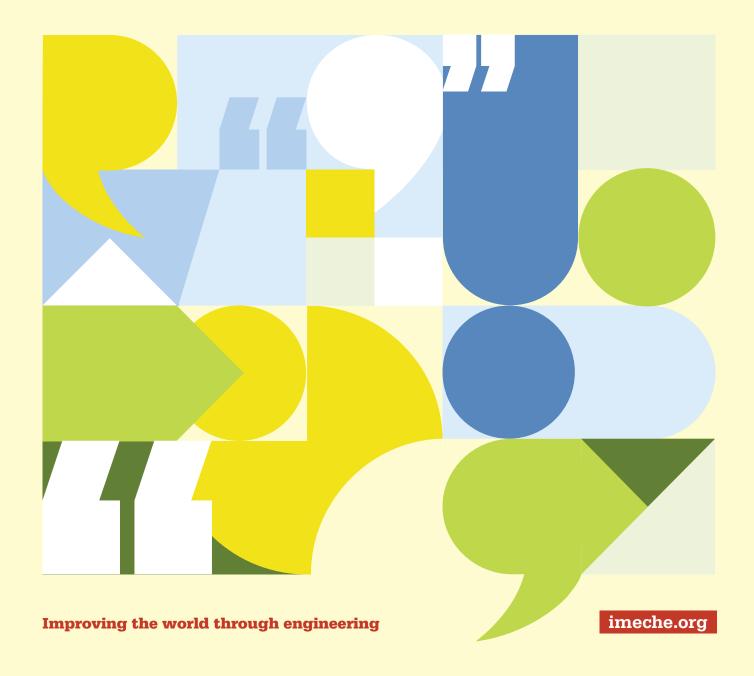# INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE.

Institution of MECHANICAL ENGINEERS

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Introduction

As an organisation of global professionals, we recognise that language serves as a powerful tool, shaping the culture and environment in which we collaborate. Inclusivity is not just a principle, it is a necessary condition of progress, fostering an atmosphere where all members feel acknowledged. These guidelines have been crafted to give each of us the tools to communicate with sensitivity, respect, and awareness, thereby enhancing the richness of our interactions.

In the realm of engineering, precision is paramount, and so too is the precision of our language. Inclusive language ensures that our communication reflects the diverse tapestry of our membership, transcending cultural, gender, and social boundaries. It is a commitment to acknowledging and embracing the spectrum of identities and experiences within our global community.

Adopting inclusive language practices allows us to achieve clearer, more effective, and more efficient communication that not only strengthens professional relationships but also unlocks a wealth of diverse perspectives. This manual is your guide to fostering a communicative environment where every member's voice is not just heard but celebrated, propelling our collective pursuit of excellence.

Definitions of accessible and inclusive communications

Diversity, inclusion, and accessibility are terms that have been used by organisations for some time, and in the context of employment and recruitment they are well understood. The concept of inclusive communications is more recent one.

Organisations that develop and deliver accessible and inclusive communications are:

- mindful of the diversity of their audience
- skilled at understanding cultural, language or access barriers
- expert at anticipating the communications needs of their audience.

Generally speaking, accessible and inclusive communications are:

Communications that have been designed and created to convey information to reach a diverse range of audiences by a variety of different channels. Inclusive communications relate to all modes of communication and strive to address the needs of people of all ages, cultural and language backgrounds, sexuality, gender, and ability.

Though accessibility and inclusion are frequently used interchangeably, it is important to understand the differences between these terms and their value in regard to embedding inclusion into every communications campaign.

Accessibility

Accessibility is ensuring that there are no barriers preventing any person from accessing your communications (website, email, social media, posters, etc). A barrier to access might be only providing materials in hardcopy, font size 10 – or only offering one type of communication route e.g. telephone contact details but no email or post address. Making something accessible means providing alternative means (formats or options) to access what's on offer if the 'standard' offer is not accessible. Accessibility is a term primarily used in reference to disabled people and communications, but it has a broader meaning.

Inclusion

By contrast, an inclusive communication is designed to reach as broad and diverse an audience as possible with accessibility for different groups built in and part of the core communication. To sum up the difference, a document might be accessible to a blind person but the overall content, language and imagery might not be inclusive of a diverse and representative array of ethnic, gender, or other identities.

Communicating with diverse audiences

Top takeaways

Communication considerations:

- Audience diversity is broad, including various languages and backgrounds.

- Plain English benefits those with English as an additional language or learning disabilities.

- Avoiding idiomatic or culturally dependent language ensures global understanding.

Consideration for holidays and observances:

- Not all holidays and observances are global or celebrated universally.

- Assuming shared observances can alienate some recipients.

Inclusive approach benefits:

- Older demographics may respond differently, facing potential barriers.

- Taking an inclusive approach reaches a wider audience than initially anticipated.

Adopting a thorough approach to diversity and inclusivity in communications is necessary for understanding how to best communicate with, to, and for, a richly diverse UK culture in which, for example:

- 51% of the UK population is female, 49% is male.

- 15% of the UK population has dyslexia.

- 6% of the UK population identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

- 87% of the UK population is white, 7% is Asian/British Asian, 3% is Black/Black British, and 3% are British mixed race.

- 15% of the UK also identifies as neurodivergent.

- 23% of working-age adults identify as having a disability.

In addition, acknowledging that we are a global organisation, we must be aware of the diversity within all of our regions, such as:

- 51% of the Japanese population is female, 49% is male.

- 1 person in 7 in France identifies as having a disability.

- India has 22 scheduled and significant religious diversity, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and Christians.

- 47.7% of the Brazilian population identifies as white, 43.1% mixed race, 7.6% Black, and 1.1% Asian

Consider your audience to be as broad and as diverse as possible to avoid unintentionally excluding people from your communications. As an organization we may predominately communicate in English, but English is only spoken by 18% of the global population, many of whom speak it as an additional language. Additionally, we must consider that our communications are not limited to just our geographical region.

Communications that are clear and use Plain English will benefit someone whose first language is not English as well as someone with a learning disability.

Communications that avoid excessively complex or culturally dependent phrasing or references will also be more easily understood by a global audience (a reference to Friends or EastEnders or Ramayan may be very meaningful to people whose background exposed them to these works but may be hard to understand or alienating to someone who has doesn't have the same set of cultural touchpoints).

Additionally, it's useful to remember that many if not most holidays and observances, both secular and religious, are not global nor are they celebrated by all (indeed, not even seasons are global – winter in London is summer in Sao Paulo). Therefore, while a wish of Happy Christmas or Ramadan Kareem or Happy Diwali to those to celebrate will certainly be appreciated by those communities, assuming that all who receive your communications will be marking the same observance can alienate some.

[*Information on the diversity of the UK, Japanese, French, and Brazilian audiences has been drawn from the statistical bodies of the respective countries.]

The business case for inclusive communications

The business case for use of inclusive communications is clear. It provides benefits in terms of both cost and user satisfaction. If communications are designed around the needs of the people who receive them, you will save time and money and your communications, will be recognised as more user friendly and fit for purpose.

A communications campaign that has actively thought about the diversity of its audience, identified the barriers certain groups may encounter, is going to be better at reaching its audience. An organisation that is able to properly communicate with the diverse needs of its audience should find that it carries out its core business more effectively. This leads to services that are more appropriate to the user, and services that are more effective and cost-effective.

Internal, external, stakeholder, business-to-business, business-to-consumer, digital, marketing & social communications all have one thing in common: we are telling someone something, so surely, we want as many people as possible to know?

Inclusive language

Purpose of inclusive language	Inclusive language positively reflects social and cultural diversity, and avoids discrimination, exclusion, and undermining of individuals or groups.
Dimensions of diversity	Inclusive language encompasses various identity aspects: race, ethnicity, sex, gender, national origin, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation.
Definition of inclusive language	Inclusive language is respectful and considers all individuals regardless of their identity dimensions.
Avoiding offence	It aims to prevent both direct and indirect offence, such as using outdated or offensive terms and excluding individuals from consideration in speech.
Dynamic nature of inclusive language	Inclusive language, like language itself, is dynamic and evolving, and recommendations are a guide to best practice at the time of writing.
Differing Community Perspectives	Not all community members agree on best practices, especially with less established language changes, making it impossible to guarantee offence-free language.
Intent of inclusive language	The purpose is to maximise respectful communication, minimise offence, and indicate the intent to communicate respectfully, acknowledging that perfection is unattainable.
Appropriate references	References to personal attributes like race, gender, marital status, or religion should be contextually relevant and consistent for everyone.
Continuous consideration	Inclusive language requires ongoing consideration and adaptation to changes in language norms and community preferences.

Inclusive language positively reflects the social and cultural diversity of your audience. It means avoiding language that discriminates, excludes or undermines individuals and groups of people.

Inclusive language encompasses several aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, sex, gender, national origin, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Collectively, these are sometimes referred to as dimensions of diversity.

Inclusive language, therefore, can be defined as language that is respectful and inclusive of all individuals regardless of their positionality in any of those dimensions. We use inclusive language both to avoid causing direct offence (by using outdated, derogatory, or otherwise offensive terms), and indirect offence (excluding someone from consideration in our speech).

It's important to note that inclusive language, like language itself, is dynamic and evolving, and the recommendations here represent a guide to best practice at the time of writing.

It's also important to remember that not all members of a given community agree on best practice, especially with less established language changes (e.g. pronouns like Sir in English or iel in French). **It's impossible to use language in a way that is guaranteed not to offend anyone.** The purpose of inclusive language is to maximise the chances of respectfully addressing or referring to a person or group, minimise the chances of causing offence, and indicate our intent to communicate respectfully, whether or not we always "get it right."

References to people's personal attributes such as their race, gender, marital status or religion should be appropriate, relevant to the context and be used consistently for everyone. For example, referring to a colleague as a "single-mother" or a "working-mother" is not necessarily information that the audience needs to know, and they are terms that are not often attributed to male parents in the same way. These particular terms can be undermining and reinforce negative feelings, stereotypes and behaviours.

What is discriminatory language?

Many every-day terms and expressions can create and reinforce bias against individuals and groups of people, used consciously or unconsciously. This can create an environment at work that is humiliating, offensive and alienating. Language is our main form of communication and it plays a powerful role both in contributing to and in eliminating discrimination. Language can also create and reinforce negative stereotypes about particular groups of people by either exaggerating or isolating particular features of that group. Language that is exclusive is harmful because it can inhibit or prevent your communications' potential to reach the widest possible audience.

Terminology best practices

Using certain kinds of language can itself create a barrier. As the English language evolves and adapts so do the terms we use to describe people in communications. How we describe people is important as labels of whatever kind have a habit of sticking. Below are some opposite charts of do's and don'ts when choosing communications terminology.

Gender

Top takeaways

• Inclusive language strategies advocate for avoiding gender references in job titles unless directly relevant to the discussion, aiming to mitigate historical biases.

• English traditionally used masculine pronouns and descriptors for individuals of unknown gender, excluding women and those outside the male-female binary.

• The use of "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun in English serves as an inclusive language solution, acknowledging diverse gender identities and avoiding the reinforcement of traditional gender biases.

Historically in the English-speaking world, language usage has privileged men and often rendered women invisible or inferior. In language terms, the most inclusive strategy is to avoid references to a person's gender for example in job titles, except when it is pertinent to the discussion.

English has also privileged the male aspect by using masculine pronouns and descriptors when the sex of person being spoken about wasn't known. This renders not only women invisible, but also those whose gender doesn't fall within the male-female binary. The most common solution for this in English is to use the third person plural pronoun *they*, and its accompanying verb conjugations, to refer to people for whom the gender is either unknown or non-binary (e.g., "If someone arrives at the conference without having pre-registered, they [instead of *he*] can check in at the desk.")

Use	Avoid	Example
Human, humans, humankind, spokesperson, chair, chairperson, quality of work/skill, attend the desk/phones	Man, men, mankind, spokesman, chairman, workmanship, phrases such as "man the desk/phones"	"The chairperson (or chair) spoke at length about the impact of climate change on the wellbeing of human-kind."
Office staff, doctor, cleaner, professor	The girls in the office, woman doctor, male nurse, cleaning lady, female professor	"Please ask one of the office staff to help you set up your account"
Author, actor, manager	Authoress, actress, manageress	"Authors like Ursula K LeGuin and Octavia Butler opened up new possibilities in science fiction"
Parental leave	Maternity leave, paternity leave	"Amira and their partner took 5 months parental leave"

Age

Top takeaways

- Age influences information processing, technology engagement, and message comprehension.
- Inclusive communications accommodate diverse preferences, digital literacy levels, and cognitive abilities associated with different age groups.
- Prioritising clarity, simplicity, and adaptability, inclusive communication strategies aim to bridge generational gaps and resonate across the lifespan.

Age is a critical factor in inclusive communications because it significantly influences how individuals process information, engage with technology, and comprehend messaging. Inclusive communications ensure that the message is accessible and meaningful to a diverse audience. For instance, considering the cognitive changes that may occur with age, inclusive communication strategies prioritise clarity, simplicity, and adaptability. Moreover, understanding the cultural references and communication styles associated with different age cohorts allows communicators to tailor their messages effectively, fostering engagement and resonance across a broad demographic spectrum.
By acknowledging the diverse needs and perspectives shaped by age, inclusive communications aim to bridge generational gaps, promote accessibility, and create content that resonates across the lifespan.

Use	Avoid	Example
Senior citizens, older adults, mature	The old, the aged, the elderly, geriatric, senile	"The Japanese workforce is dominated by older adults"
Young people, younger person, young adults (18–25 years)	Kids, girls, boys (when referring to young adults)	"Young people form the majority of the population of Senegal"

Disability

Top takeaways

- Traditional language emphasises disability, portraying individuals as helpless rather than as equal contributors to society.
- Person-first language encourages phrases like "person with a disability" to prioritise humanity over labels, reducing stigmas and promoting respect.
- Person-first language aims to reduce stigma and discrimination by recognising individuals beyond their labels, promoting universal respect.

Traditional portrayals of disabled individuals have often focused on their disabilities rather than their humanity. Terms like 'wheelchair-bound' or 'sufferer' reinforce this misconception, overlooking the independence that tools like wheelchairs provide for active living.

Preference is shifting towards person-first language, emphasising the individual's humanity before their condition. For instance, saying 'person with a disability' is generally preferred over 'disabled person'. While there's no universal consensus on its usage, a good rule of thumb is to prioritise humanity when referring to marginalised groups. This might range from 'person with a disability' (most recommended) to 'cripple' (outdated and offensive). Person-first language aims to combat stigma and discrimination by recognising individuals beyond their labels, advocating for respect and dignity for all, regardless of their characteristics.

Use	Avoid	Example
Disabled person or person with disability*	The disabled, handicapped, crippled	"Popular tourist sites are sometimes inaccessible to people with disabilities"
Person or non-disabled person, Dwarf, person of short stature, person of restricted growth	Able-bodied person, normal person, Midget	"Both disabled and non-disabled people benefit from accessibility"
Person with a certain condition or impairment	Sufferer	"People with mobility limitations may need to use the lift. To reach the second floor"
Wheelchair or mobility-scooter user	Wheelchair or mobility-scooter- bound or confined	"Curb cutouts are an important part of accessible urban planning for wheelchair users and people with strollers"
Learning disability	Backwards, slow, mentally handicapped	"The school will make accommodations for students who may have a learning disability"
Deaf people/hearing impaired Blind people/visually impaired	The deaf The blind	"We encourage using alt text for the visually impaired"
Brain injury	Brain damage	"Some forms of brain injury require rehabilitation"

Sexual orientation and gender identity

- Considering sexual orientation in inclusive communications helps counteract the historical invisibility and marginalisation of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community.

- Inclusive communications that acknowledge and respect various sexual orientations contribute to a more diverse and equal representation of individuals, promoting an environment where everyone feels seen and valued.

- Many people share their pronouns, but doing so is a personal choice involving many factors.

The enduring bias in society against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTIA+) people makes many people feel invisible, marginalised and inferior to heterosexual/ 'cisgender' people. This means an organisation's communications should ensure the language it uses to refer to people's sexual orientation and gender identity is accurate and appropriate.

Many people who are communicating in gendered languages also include their pronouns (he, she, they, etc) in their email signatures to avoid being misgendered or to help contribute to a welcoming and safe environment for people of all genders. No one should feel compelled to share their pronouns, however, as doing so can lead to discomfort or danger for the person involved. Feel free to share your pronouns in those situations where you feel comfortable doing so.

Use	Avoid	Example
Gay, gay man, lesbian, openly lesbian, openly gay	Homosexual, gay/homosexual lifestyle, admitted homosexual, avowed homosexual	"The Taoiseach of Ireland is a gay man"
Partner	Boyfriend or girlfriend	"Feel free to bring your partner to the company party"
Sexual orientation	Sexual preference	"Sexual orientation is an important of one's identity"
Spouse	Husband, wife	"You will be able to add your spouse to your health insurance"

Race and ethnicity

Top takeaways

- Ethnic and racial labels can be used to disadvantage or harm certain groups, both intentionally and unintentionally.
- To counter unintentional biases and foster inclusivity, it is crucial to be sensitive in using ethnic and racial labels and seek to use the preferred terminology.

Ethnic and racial labels, names and expressions can be created and used to portray certain groups as inferior or superior to others. Sometimes this usage is unintentional and stems from the continued dominance of white mainstream culture; other times, it is deliberately used to marginalise, demean and discriminate.

Note 1: The term BAME is not universally accepted by racially minoritised people in the UK. Some people don't find it problematic while others do, saying that it positions white British as being the standard and therefore all others as being secondary. If you are unsure, it is always wise to ask the person in question how they feel about the term before using it. If you're unsure you can say "person of [x] heritage/descent."

Note 2: "African American" refers to individuals who are American and have African ancestry. Traditionally its use is restricted to Black Americans whose ancestors were brought to the North American continent as part of the transatlantic slave trade.

Use	Avoid	Example
Minority ethnic group	Minority group, visible minority	"Certain policing practices discriminate against minority ethnic groups"
African American, Black, Black British, Asian, Asian British, Jewish (NB: "Black" is normally capitalised when used to describe the ethnic group)	Coloured person, person of colour, any offensive slang words referring to a racial or ethnic group	"The president of South Africa is Black"
Mixed race, multiracial, multiethnic	Any offensive slang words referring to people of mixed race	"For the first time, multiracial individuals will be able to specify their ethnicity on the census"
Traveller community	Any offensive slang words referring to the traveller community	"The Traveller community is categorised as an ethnic minority group"
Roma	Gypsy (this word is considered offensive by some members of the Roma community)	"Roma music has contributed a great deal to the music of the Balkans"