

Advancing Racial Equity & Inclusion through Language Worksheet for individuals¹



Purpose: This worksheet helps individuals refine their language to be inclusive. It is to be completed after reading through [Advancing Language for Racial Equity & Inclusion: To The Point](#).

Instructions: Individually complete activities A and B.

Activity A

In the summer of 2020, many US companies spoke out publicly about the killing of George Floyd while in custody of Minneapolis police. The below is a fictional excerpt from a company memo. Read the excerpt and then answer the following questions.

To: staff <staff@generictechcompany.com>
From: CEO
CC: HR
Date: June 5, 2020, 8:09AM
Re: Anti-racism statement and actions

Dear All,

What happened to George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and countless other African Americans who've been targeted because of the color of their skin is beyond devastating. We, alongside our industry peers, stand with the black community.

To begin with, we recognize that we do not have sufficient representation of black people in leadership and other roles -- and we cannot expect our non-white employees to hold down the fort as the sole champions for equity and inclusion. It is time for us as an organization to get down to the nitty gritty and improve recruitment and retention rates for underrepresented minorities. To this effect, ..."

We can imagine that the memo goes on to list detailed strategies to achieve the goals outlined here. For this activity, focus on these opening paragraphs.

**1. Can you identify eight ways to improve the language used here?
Think back to the good practices in the playbook and try to identify:**

- a. **Harmful terms:** Circle 2 terms that should not be used at all (linked to racist histories or connotations).
- b. **Imprecise language:** Underline 3 instances of imprecise language – this can be language that fails to specify which demographic groups are being referred to, or terminology that is inconsistent.
- c. **Organization of words & phrases:** Put a box around 2 phrases that use passive language or vague language that skirts the core topics of race and racism.
- d. **Writing mechanics:**² Highlight 1 example of a writing mechanic choice that should be updated.

2. Why are the issues you have identified important to address and update?

3. Given the issues identified and what you know about language that advances racial equity and inclusion, how might you rewrite the memo to improve it? [Note: There is no one "right" answer!]

Activity B

Follow along with the scenario (in orange) and answer the questions related to it:

Alex is tasked with moderating a panel for college seniors on mitigating bias in artificial intelligence. Prior to moderating the event, they must also introduce the panellists, all of whom are prominent industry leaders. Two of the panelists are White (one man and one woman), and Alex is not sure whether the third panelist, Maya, identifies as a Black woman or an African American woman.

1. Suppose Maya has expressed that she identifies as a Black woman, but Alex has just accidentally referred to her as an African American woman during the panel. Maya does not point it out, but Alex picks up on the error immediately. How should they proceed? *[Check all those that apply]*
 - a. Acknowledge the mistake through a brief apology, express that they will do better going forward, and move on.
 - b. Apologize profusely until Maya convinces them that she isn't offended, and that everything is okay.
 - c. Not say anything in the moment, but ensure that they use the right term through the rest of the event and apologize to Maya later, acknowledging the impact of the mistake.

A portion of the event is dedicated to discussing the state of diversity and inclusion in the tech industry. Given some recent findings about the lack of Black and African American women in leadership roles within STEM fields more broadly, Alex would like to focus on this issue in particular.

2. Which of the following terms would be most appropriate for Alex to use when referencing this demographic group and their lack of representation? *[Check all those that apply]*
 - a. Minority
 - b. Underrepresented minority
 - c. Historically marginalized
 - d. Historically minoritized
3. During this part of the panel, Alex asks Maya a question about her personal experience in the tech industry. Which of the following way(s) could Alex choose to phrase the question? *[Check all those that apply]*
 - a. As a diverse individual in the tech industry,...
 - b. As an underrepresented minority in the tech industry,...
 - c. Alex should ask Maya how she identifies prior to the event and specifically use her preferred term (i.e., "As a Black woman,..." or "As an African American woman,...")
 - d. It is not necessary for Alex to refer to Maya's identity. They can simply ask Maya her thoughts on how marginalized groups have fared in the tech industry or at her specific organization.

Alex realizes that they aren't sure about the right terms to use to refer to different racial groups. After the event, Alex tries to educate themselves about the right definitions.

Use the table provided to help Alex match the terms below with their correct definitions.

REFER TO THE TABLE BELOW AND WRITE THE MATCHING LETTERS (A-E) HERE				
Black person	Black American	African American	Person/ people of color (POC)	Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)

	DEFINITIONS
a	This term refers to American citizens who are racially categorized as Black, but who are the descendants of immigrants who were not enslaved.
b	This is an umbrella term used to collectively refer to all racial groups — it includes anyone who isn't White.
c	This term refers to those who are racially categorized as Black, regardless of their citizenship status and their family's particular migration history. This term highlights that people racially categorized as Black have a common experience, while also acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Black population.
d	This is a variation on the umbrella term "people of color (POC)", which refers to anyone who isn't White. It specifically refers to Black and Indigenous groups to acknowledge that not all people of color face the same injustices — Black and Indigenous people are severely impacted by systemic racial injustices.
e	This term is generally applied to people who are descendants of enslaved people. It references both the ancestral origins of members of this group, as well as their citizenship in the US.

Answer Key

Activity A

1. See below for a visual representation of what the excerpt should look like after going through all parts of this question.

To: staff <staff@generictechcompany.com>
From: CEO
CC: HR
Date: June 5, 2020, 8:09AM
Re: Anti-racism statement and actions

Dear All,

What happened to George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and countless other African Americans who've been targeted because of the color of their skin is beyond devastating. We, alongside our industry peers, stand with the black community.

To begin with, we recognize that we do not have sufficient representation of black people in leadership and other roles -- and we cannot expect our non-white employees to hold down the fort as the sole champions for equity and inclusion. It is time for us as an organization to get down to the nitty gritty and improve recruitment and retention rates for underrepresented minorities. To this effect, ..."

a. **Harmful terms:**

- *Hold down the fort*: the term is currently used to refer to a person who is put in charge when the actual leader is away or otherwise occupied. However, the phrase may evoke reference to how White settler-colonials violently fought against Native Americans as they invaded and expropriated their land.
- *Nitty gritty*: This term now refers to basic facts or fundamentals of a situation. However, theories suggest the expression originally referred to the detritus found in the bottom of boats once a shipment of enslaved people had been removed from the hold, and was eventually stretched to refer to the enslaved individuals themselves.

**Refer to [this tab](#) of our Terminology Guide for more context and alternatives for these and many more harmful terms.

b. **Imprecise language:**

- *The use of "African American" and "Black people" interchangeably*. African American is a term generally applied to people who are descendants of enslaved people. African refers to the ancestral origins of members of this group, while American refers to their citizenship in the country. Black people refers to those who are racially categorized as Black, regardless of their citizenship status and their family's particular migration

history. This term highlights that people racially categorized as Black have a common experience, while also acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Black population. They are not synonymous.

- *The use of "Non-white"*, which functions as an umbrella term for all individuals who are not White. This term conflates the experiences of various diverse racial and ethnic groups when in fact not all groups face the same systemic injustices; in this excerpt we are addressing a form of discrimination that is unique to Black people.
- *The use of "underrepresented minorities"*, which also contains two words that function as umbrella terms: "underrepresented" and "minority". The term groups together vastly different social group categories. "Minority" also implies that the state of being a numerical minority is natural / a given. It emphasizes a sense of being "less than" majority groups while obscuring the social reality of years of oppression, discrimination, and power dynamics that have resulted in this low representation.

**See [this tab](#) of our terminology guide for definitions of key racial terms as well as guidance around precise language.

c. **Organization of words and phrases:**

- *The use of passive voice through the phrase "What happened to..."* in reference to the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor hides the people and institutions responsible for these racist and violent actions.
- *The vague phrase "because of the color of their skin"* positions race, and not racism as the core issue. By failing to name anti-blackness, racism, or white supremacy as the causes of racial violence, it obscures the need to combat these core issues.³

d. **Language mechanic:**

- *"black" as in "black people" and "black community" is not capitalized.* While there isn't a consensus on whether not capitalizing "Black" in this context is incorrect, there are multiple arguments for capitalizing the term. Doing so provides Black people, who have been subjected to centuries of systemic racism, the opportunity to reclaim power in society. Furthermore, it highlights a shared cultural history.

**Refer to [this tab](#) of our Terminology Guide to stay up to date on current debates around language use and mechanics.

Note that this list may not be comprehensive. A lot more can be analysed, from the tone of the paragraphs to the decision to focus on recruitment and retention rates, which are widely considered as ways to track representation through numbers, instead of measures of inclusion.

2. Some of the issues associated with the language identified include:

- a. Using imprecise, broad terms like "underrepresented minorities" can make it difficult to pinpoint the most effective business strategies. For instance, recruitment approaches for women might need to be different from the ones that are most successful in reaching Black candidates.
- b. Using imprecise terms like "non-White" also positions whiteness as the default, perpetuating the harmful notion that people of other races or ethnicities are somehow deviant.
- c. Using passive language obscures the individuals or institutions responsible for an action. The same is true for language that is vague. This makes it difficult to hold the right actors accountable for racist and/or violent outcomes. In the example provided

here, deliberately calling out racism and white supremacy would be an important step in dismantling policies and practices that promote them.

Note that this is not a comprehensive list.

3. A sample excerpt may read as follows:

To: staff <staff@generictechcompany.com>
From: CEO
CC: HR
Date: June 5, 2020, 8:09AM
Re: Anti-racism statement and actions

Dear All,

The murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black people highlight the persistence of racism, police brutality, and white supremacy in the United States. We, alongside our industry peers, must lead the charge to drive anti-racism.

To begin with, we recognize that we have failed to achieve equitable representation of Black people in leadership and other roles -- and we cannot continue to place the burden of being champions for equity and inclusion on our few BIPOC employees. It is time for us as an organization to revisit the fundamentals and improve recruitment and retention rates for Black employees, who have historically been marginalized by this industry. To this effect, ..."

Note that there isn't a single right answer for how this memo should look. This revised version attempts to improve upon the aspects outlined in the previous questions, but ultimately language is fluid and evolving, and there are multiple ways to present these ideas using equitable and inclusive language.

Activity B

1. **Remember that there is a difference between intent and impact.** (a) and (c) are both appropriate responses. It can be difficult to react quickly when you have heard or said something hurtful. But whether the intent was good or bad, the impact is real and should be honored. (a) allows Alex to let Maya know that they recognize their actions had a negative impact. (c) is another way for Alex to do so and start a conversation about what they can do together to move forward. On the other hand, while (b) does entail an apology, the approach places the onus on Maya to comfort Alex. It is important to keep the affected party at the center.

**Read our [guide for having difficult conversations about race & identity](#) to learn more.

2. **Use precise terms.** (c) and (d) are both appropriate responses. "Minority" or "underrepresented minority" may be mathematically accurate in this case.

However, when used in reference to any group of individuals these terms imply that the state of being a numerical minority is natural / a given. They emphasize a status of “less than” the majority group, and obscure the social reality of oppression, discrimination and power dynamics that have resulted in low representation of an outgroup. In such situations, using terms like “minoritized” and “marginalized,” which acknowledge that inequities are being actively enforced by systems and business practices, is more precise.

3. **Listen to how people describe themselves.** (c) and (d) are both appropriate responses. If possible, Alex should privately ask Maya to share how she self-identifies, and honor her self-identification by using the terms she suggests. If Maya is not comfortable or willing to share this information, or if Alex does not have the opportunity to speak with her prior to the event, they should reconsider whether racial terms are needed at all.

4.

REFER TO THE TABLE BELOW AND WRITE THE MATCHING LETTERS (A-E) HERE				
Black person	Black American	African American	Person/ people of color (POC)	Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)
c	a	e	b	d

Endnotes

- 1 This worksheet is part of the Advancing Language for Racial Equity & Inclusion playbook. It was developed by a team of researchers from the Center for Equity, Gender, and Leadership (EGAL) at the University of California Berkeley, Haas School of Business. It benefitted from invaluable feedback and contributions from practitioners across industries and in academia. The project has a particular focus on race and the United States, although it includes examples across identities and geographies. We respectfully acknowledge that this work has been developed at UC Berkeley, which sits on unceded Ohlone land.
- 2 In composition, writing mechanics are the conventions governing the technical aspects of writing, including spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and abbreviations.
Source: Nordquist, R. (n.d.). The Mechanics of Writing Composition. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/mechanics-composition-term-1691304#>
- 3 Hamilton, A. M. (2020, September 09). What’s missing from corporate statements on racial injustice? The real cause of racism. Retrieved from <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/09/05/1008187/racial-injustice-statements-tech-companies-racism-racecraft-opinion/>

This worksheet was developed by the Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership at UC Berkeley Haas School of Business. It is an accompanying resource to [Advancing Language for Racial Equity and Inclusion](#).



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