McGill University

Inclusive Language Guideline

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Introduction[1]

Language is the chief vehicle for the expression of discrimination and intolerance, and reflects the attitudes and realities of a society. A **McGill University Inclusive Language Guideline** could be part of a larger commitment toward realizing the University's goal that all members of the McGill community are respected for their worth, dignity, integrity and capacity, and that the equitable treatment of all persons – regardless of age, colour, creed, disability, gender, national origin, or sexual orientation- is in accordance with applicable national and provincial laws.[2]

A group of McGill community stakeholders has developed this Guideline to encourage staff and students to think actively about the implications of their language use. Additionally, the Guideline could reinforce the importance of the use of inclusive language in all University documents, publications and communications.[3] By upholding the use of a shared vocabulary that promotes sensitivity and awareness, McGill University would support the development of a culture of inclusivity.

Definition of Inclusive Language

Inclusive language is sometimes referred to as non-discriminatory language. Essentially, this means using a vocabulary that does not demean, insult, exclude, stereotype, essentialize or trivialize people on the basis of their membership in a certain group, or because of a particular trait, attribute, or feature. Using inclusive language does not mean having to use terms that are difficult, or grammatically incorrect; rather, it means avoiding

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[1] This document has been principally informed by the following sources: Employment Equity Office, the University of Windsor; Inclusive Language Guideline of the University of Newcastle, Australia.

[2] Article I.1. of the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedom notes that "every person has a right to full and equal recognition and exercise of his human rights and freedoms, without distinction, exclusion or preference based on race, colour, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, civil status, age except as provided by law, religion, political convictions, language, ethnic or national origin, social condition, a handicap or the use of any means to palliate a handicap." Source: "R.S.Q., chapter C-12,CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS," http://www.cdpdj.qc.ca/en/commun/docs/charter.pdf. Visited December 15 2009.

[3] The use of non-inclusive language that is true to its historical context is not the subject of this Guideline.

terminology that may be offensive, and selecting other suitable terms. It means using language that recognizes all people as valued and equal participants in society as well as acknowledging that many offensive and derogatory terms which may refer to specific groups continue to exist within our everyday language. Thus, inclusive language is language that does not portray any individual or group in a negative stereotype, as dependant, or as powerless. Inclusive language is appropriate and important in all situations, and should be used in all forms of communication- speech, language, publications, displays, posters, and teaching materials. This document gives examples of common usages of non-inclusive language, and offers practical substitutes to avoid discriminatory words and expressions.

Valuing Diversity

McGill University has a number of precedent policies[4] related to equity and diversity that affect students and employees:

- Charter of Students' Rights; Fundamental Rights and Freedoms
- Policy on Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Prohibited by Law
- Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities
- Policy for the Accommodation for Religious Holy Days
- Policy on Hazing and Inappropriate Initiation Practices
- McGill Employment Equity Policy
- McGill Employee Disability Policy

Moreover, through the creation and continued support of its Social Equity and Diversity Education (SEDE) Office, the University has shown its commitment to "fostering a fair and inclusive environment that respects the dignity of each member of the McGill Community."[5]

These equity policies assist the University in developing an environment where the diversity of its faculty, staff, and student population is respected and promoted. The goal is to ensure that our staff and students can work and study in an environment free of harassment and discrimination. Such an environment is created, in large part, through the interpersonal behavior of individuals and in the language of communication used in interactions. By using inclusive language, members of the University community play an important part in creating such an environment.

As an employer and as an educator, McGill University is legally obligated to ensure people can work and study in an environment that is free of harassment and discrimination and that is not hostile or demeaning.

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[4] Please see: http://www.mcgill.ca/equity_diversity/policies/. Visited December 2009.
[5] Mandate of the Social Equity and Diversity Education Office.
http://www.mcgill.ca/equity_diversity/aboutus/. Visited July 2009.

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This guideline thus has two main purposes:

- to assist faculty, staff, and students in using inclusive language
- to encourage awareness and educate members of our community about language use.

Language is a powerful and dynamic tool; it shapes and reflects our changing realities.

The rich diversity of our faculty, staff, and students is one of McGill's strongest assets. Thus, it is wise to assume that in any group, there will be people from a number of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with visible or hidden disabilities, representing different gender identities and sexual orientations, and holding different religious and spiritual beliefs.

Each of us has a responsibility to be sensitive to the diversity of our audience, whether talking informally with one person, drafting official University documentation (e.g., brochures, student guides), speaking in a lecture, or addressing a meeting. We also have a responsibility to ensure that the content of our speech is free of sexist, racist, homophobic, discriminatory, or otherwise offensive messages.

Language may present and perpetuate particular views of society and of "others." Language can consciously or unconsciously offend, intimidate, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and contribute to unequal status of individuals. This is particularly important when people have different positions of relative power, or where there are limited opportunities for the audience to challenge and question what is being communicated.

Language and gender

Language that privileges one gender over another, which diminishes the role and status of one gender or that renders it invisible is often termed *sexist*. Traditionally, such language has tended to devalue (or hide) women and privilege men. Language that marginalizes or parodies people who self-identify with the LGBTQ[6] community is also discriminatory.

Please see Appendix: Section I for some approaches to using inclusive language with regard to gender.

Language and sexuality

Language that categorizes people negatively on the basis of their actual or assumed sexual orientation is often discriminatory and offensive. In circumstances where many people would never make comments about other personal attributes, it is still common to hear derogatory remarks made about sexual orientation. While members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer communities have reclaimed some terms as a means of empowerment, it is not generally acceptable to use terms such as "dyke" or "fag." See Appendix: Section II.

Language, race, and racialization

Racialization is the imposition or application of race onto others as a means of categorization or interpreting traits and behaviours. Racist language labels and stigmatizes particular racialized groups or attributes and at the same time privileges whiteness; perceptions based on "race" are used to discriminate against and differentiate between individuals and groups while creating and perpetuating stereotypes. Racialization of others is, in itself, a form of discrimination, and should be avoided. See Appendix: Section III.

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[6] This acronym is sometimes presented as LGBTTIQQ: Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transsexual, Two-Spirited, Intersex, Queer, and Questioning.

Language and culture

Use of culturally inclusive language means using words and concepts that represent all ethnic, cultural, and religious groups equitably.

Canada's national history is one of linguistic, ethnic, ancestral, and spiritual diversity. In this context, awareness of and sensitivity to how the language we use reflects on cultural diversity is necessary, with emphasis on three particular areas.

First Peoples

The rich linguistic and cultural diversity of First Peoples in Canada is of particular importance. Effort should be made to acknowledge both the diversity amongst First Peoples, and their special position both in Canadian history and contemporary society.

Official Languages

While the people of Canada speak hundreds of languages in both public and private life, French and English receive special recognition as Canada's official languages. Members of the McGill community should remain conscious of the equal emphasis placed on French and English in Canada, and of the significance of French in Montreal and Quebec.

Multiculturalism

Canada is also home to a number of cultural groups not accounted for within First Peoples, Francophone, and Anglophone identities. The language we choose should reflect both the general diversity around us, in addition to recognizing special groups within Canada. See Appendix: Section IV.

Language and disability

Non-inclusive language in relation to people with a disability often focuses on the disability as part of the person, rather than casting disability as a

political, social, and environmental problem. In recent years, people with disabilities and their allies have developed international models of disability based on the fact that while the impairment is the actual "condition," the "disability" is caused by what is missing in the environment (purposely or inadvertently), reducing the individual's full participation in activities, quality of life, and causing clear disadvantages to the individual.

Such barriers perpetuate stereotypes of weakness and over-medicalization, which focus on the physical and/or mental therapies, medications, surgeries, and assistive devices that might help to "normalize" the disabled person rather than concentrating on universal design. This affects the language that is used when referring to people with a disability, especially when the impairment is placed before the person (i.e. *blind* or *deaf person*). See Appendix: Section V.

Language and extra-visibility

This type of non-inclusive language refers to the addition of unnecessary detail to emphasize a particular characteristic, which creates the impression that
   a) the characteristic is particularly significant, and/or that
   b) the characteristic is odd or undesirable.[7]
Some examples of this type of discriminatory language include references such as an "Asian police officer," a "male nurse" or a "Christian student."

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[7] "Inclusive Language Guideline," University of Newcastle, Australia.
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policy/000797.html

Conclusion

According to the last Statistics Canada Census (2006), 16.2% of the total population self-identified as members of a visible minority group. This proportion had increased from 13.4% in 2001. Many social and cultural changes, recognized and protected by the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedom, are evidence that our society is increasingly diverse and culturally rich. As an educational institution dedicated to innovation and preparing students for the future, do we at McGill embrace diversity and inclusivity, as reflected by our conscious use of language that is inclusive and equitable?

This document seeks to help raise awareness and to foster sensitivity to the idea that the language we use is tied to how we perceive the surrounding world. The Guideline is not a commandment, but simply an invitation to re-examine choices and to bring greater awareness and engagement to the use of language.

Future developments will include the publication of a complementary French version of the Inclusive Language Guideline, as well as the creation of a glossary of terms.

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APPENDIX

The following Appendix includes examples of non-inclusive language and inclusive expressions that may be used as substitutes. It is important to note, however, that language is ever-evolving, and there is no perfect agreement on terms.

I. Language and Gender

a) The "Man" Trap: Many standard wordings seem to assume that every individual is male. Repeating *he and she, him and her, his and hers* at every reference is clumsy. Finding alternatives can be as simple as using plural rather than singular, or avoiding a pronoun altogether:

• seems to exclude women	Man is a tool-building animal.
• inclusive	Humans are tool-building animals.
• seems to exclude women	Every artist learns from those who came before him.
• inclusive but awkward	Every artist learns from those who came before him or her.
• inclusive	Every artist learns from those who came before.

The use of *man* in the generic sense, as a verb or in compound words such as *freshman,* is to be avoided. In the instance of freshman, the term can be replaced with '*first-year.*'

b) Gendered Labels, i.e. terms that label people simply on the basis of their gender:

　　i. Feminine forms of words such as *poetess* or *woman doctor* are no longer used. Similarly, *policewoman* and

chairwoman are problematic. These terms can be replaced by non-gendered words: *poet, doctor, police officer, chair,* etc.

ii. Terms such as *dear, sweetie, love, ladies, chicks, girls* can be patronizing and condescending in certain situations.

iii. Titles like *Mr., Mrs.,* and even the recently invented *Ms.* are less and less used orally in most English-speaking groups of North America and their function in writing is limited. The decline of these terms is partially due to the fact that they are not inclusive of all gender identities. While these titles are often expected in the salutations of formal letters (*Dear Ms. Lee*), they are seldom necessary in internal memos. It is appropriate to address a memo *TO: Sandra Lee* and sign it *FROM: John Pereira.* It is also acceptable to say *Dear Chris Singh* and bypass the question of gender.

II. Language and Sexuality

a) Terms used to identify or categorize a person's sexual orientation should never be used as an epithet, i.e. *that's so gay.*

b) In the case of using the terms *gay, lesbian,* and *queer,* the standard should be what the people in a specific community have defined, and which term they prefer to use.

c) The acronym LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) is a constantly developing portmanteau for a wide variety of gender and sexual identities.

III. Language and Racialization

a) People are often racialized according to generalizations made on the basis of physical traits. Racial labels are only appropriate where a person or group has self-identified with the term in question. For example, not all people who have brown skin and are of African descent identify themselves as *Black.* In addition, such labels should only be used when they are relevant and there is a need to mention a person's race.

b) Language is often used to create a link between behaviour and race. This can be done either by racializing a person who has acted a certain way (*I bet the student who complained about a grade was White*), or by expecting certain behaviours from a person based on a prior racialization (*That Chinese student must not have any problems in our Calculus class*).

    i. Racial assumptions should not be used to make assumptions about a person's character, qualifications, or behaviour. For example, the statement "Asian students can expect to see the greatest success in the fields of Business, Computer Science, and Engineering" ignores the skills, aptitudes, and interests of students by focusing on racialized stereotypes.

ii. Racial qualifiers should not be used when they are not relevant to the message being presented. For example, in the statement "One of my black students delivered an excellent presentation today," the student's race is irrelevant to the quality of the presentation.

c) While race and racial groupings are constructed on the basis of skin colour, physical features, ancestry, shared history, or some combination of the above, race is not a biological or scientific trait. Race is not a trait that a person is born with, but is a characteristic that is attributed through social processes.

d) Although race is a social construct, racialization can and does have a very real impact on individuals and groups of people. The use of quotation marks ("Black,""Asian,""White" etc) shows that the author recognizes the contested and constructed nature of the word. The term 'racial' can be used to describe situations or relationships where interactions are influenced by racialization (e.g. racial harassment, racial inequality, etc.).[8]

IV. Language and Culture

a) Generalizations should be avoided about ethnicity and religion. Not everyone in an ethnic group necessarily has the same religion, nor do all religions share the same ethnicity or cultural background. For example, not all Lebanese or Turkish people are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabic or Turkish.

b) Although *Indian* remains in place as the legal term used in the Canadian Constitution, its usage outside such situations is considered offensive. The terms *First Peoples, Indigenous* and *First Nations* are currently in use, and are occasionally used as descriptive terms by U.S. Native Americans in solidarity with Canadian First Peoples.

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[8] "Non-sexist, non-racist language," University of Gloucestershire.
http://resources.glos.ac.uk/pdp/pdpstudents/lpd/writingskills/nonsexistnonracist.cfm

c) Where controversy exists over the naming of a group of people, one solution is to use the name preferred by the people in question.

V. Language and Disabilities[9]

a) The World Health Organization[10] defines disability and impairment in the following way: "Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives."

b) Avoid defining people by their disorders or depersonalizing people by turning descriptors into nouns, e.g. "the disabled," "the blind," "an epileptic," "a schizophrenic."

Put the person first, not the disability:

Improper examples:	Proper examples:
• A *blind* person	• A person who has a visual impairment
• A *schizophrenic*	• A person with/who has *schizophrenia*
•	
• A *parapalegic*	• A person with *paraplegia*

c) Visual impairment" or "sight impairment" is often used to indicate some loss of vision or as alternatives to "blind." Be aware that some individuals or groups may dislike the use of "impaired."

Preferred terms are sometimes "deaf" or "hard of hearing" rather than "hearing impaired."

Use factual rather than negative or value-laden references. A person may have a condition but may not necessarily "suffer" from it.

d) A person's adaptive equipment should be described functionally as something that assists a person, not as something that limits a person, e.g. *a woman who uses a wheelchair* rather than is "in" it or is "confined" to it.

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