

Bias-Free Communication

One way civil discourse can quickly become uncivil is through use of biased language. Bias typically involves predisposition on an issue or built-in stereotypes about a group of people that may make it difficult to be neutral when communicating with others. When bias exists in individual attitudes, it is often reflected in the language and in the way that individuals interact with each other. Many times, we do not intend to exclude or offend others by the words we choose. We may simply lack information about, and sensitivity to, certain words or phrases. Being aware and mindful of our language, both written and oral, can help create a supportive and inclusive climate.

(Michigan State University, Guidelines for Communicating in a Diverse Community, <http://www.inclusion.msu.edu>)

Guidelines for Achieving Bias-Free Communication

- **Be aware of words, images and situations that suggest that all or most members of a group are the same.** Stereotypes often lead to assumptions that are unsupportable and offensive.
- **Avoid qualifiers that reinforce stereotypes.** A qualifier is added information that suggests what is being said is an exception to what is expected.
- **Identify people by identity characteristics only when relevant.** Very few situations require such identification.
- **Be aware of language that, to some people, has questionable racial or ethnic connotations.** While a word or phrase may not be personally offensive to you, it may be to others.
- **Be aware of the possible negative implications of color symbolic words.** Choose language and usage that do not offend people or reinforce bias. In some instances, black and yellow have become associated with the undesirable or negative.
- **Avoid patronizing language and tokenism toward any racial or ethnic group.**
- **Substitute substantive information for ethnic clichés.** Don't let ethnic clichés substitute for in-depth information.
- **Review media to see if all groups are fairly represented.**

(Taken from the Anti-Defamation League, 2007. Originally adapted with permission from Without Bias: A Guidebook for Nondiscriminatory Communication, Second Edition with permission from John Wiley & Sons, Inc. © 1982.)