The Role of Inclusive Language in Technical Writing

A guide to understanding and implementing inclusive language in technical communication and beyond.

This document defines inclusive language, highlights its importance and impact, outlines core principles, provides real-world examples from GitHub, offers an implementation guide for individuals and organizations, addresses common challenges, showcases real-life implementations by tech companies, and lists additional resources.

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Inclusive language 101

Definition of inclusive language

Inclusive language refers to communication that avoids using words, phrases, or tones that might be considered exclusionary or discriminatory, reflecting respect and consideration for all individuals.

Inclusive language is used across various fields, including education, healthcare, business, and technology. It reflects an effort to recognize and respect diversity in all forms, including race, gender, age, ability, and cultural background. Rather than simply avoiding offense, inclusive language promotes belonging and equity by acknowledging people’s identities and experiences. As communication practices evolve, inclusive language has become a standard in ethical, professional, and accessible communication.

Importance in technical communication

In technical communication, inclusive language ensures that content is accessible and relatable to a diverse audience. It helps in eliminating biases and potential misunderstandings, allowing for clear and effective dissemination of information.

Impact on user experience

Enhanced readability

By using inclusive language, texts become more universally understandable, increasing engagement and comprehension across different demographics.

Promoting accessibility

Inclusive language ensures that communication is accessible to people with varying backgrounds, abilities, and experiences, making it more universally accessible.

Preventing alienation of users

It avoids making users feel excluded due to language that might be perceived as discriminatory or biased.

Respect and empathy

Inclusive language is seen as a gesture of respect and empathy towards users, which can significantly enhance the user experience. It demonstrates that the organization values diversity and inclusion in its engagement with people.

According to a report by the Linguistic Society of America, such practices align with promoting empowerment and reducing bias across communication.

Business impact

Trust and credibility

Organizations that prioritize inclusive language are perceived as being more equitable and socially responsible, enhancing their reputation.

Broader reach

Companies can engage with a more extensive audience, maximizing their market penetration and effectiveness in communication.

Market accessibility

Organizations that do not adopt inclusive language may miss opportunities to engage with diverse audiences, impacting sales and market expansion.

Talent acquisition

Companies portraying inclusivity are more attractive to a wider pool of talent, enabling them to hire from a more diverse and skilled workforce.

Financial results

While specific financial outcomes from using inclusive language in content are less frequently isolated, there is significant evidence linking diversity and inclusion with better business performance. McKinsey's 'Diversity Wins' report (2020) found that companies more ethically involved in diversity practices are more likely to see higher profits.

Core principles of inclusive language

Person-first approach

This approach emphasizes referring to individuals first, rather than defining them by their disability, disorder, or diagnosis.

👍Recommended	👎Not recommended
person with dyslexia	dyslexic
person who uses a wheelchair	wheelchair-bound

Gender-neutral language

This involves using terms that do not specify a particular gender when it is unnecessary.

👍Recommended	👎Not recommended
Chair or Chairperson	Chairman or Chairwoman
firefighter	fireman

Cultural sensitivity

This requires awareness and sensitivity towards different cultural backgrounds. Localization is essential as it can make content accessible to various cultures if done appropriately. This might involve adapting content to fit cultural norms, idioms, and symbols pertinent to specific audiences.

👍Recommended	👎Not recommended
Japanese people	the Japanese
Native American	Indian

Accessible language

Using clear and straightforward language that everyone can understand, regardless of their reading level or cognitive abilities. This means avoiding jargon and overly complex language that might confuse or alienate.

👍Recommended	👎Not recommended
use	utilize
start	initiate

Avoiding ableist language

Ableist language includes terms and phrases that marginalize those with disabilities. Striving for language that is respectful and considers the perspectives and experiences of disabled individuals is crucial.

👍**Recommended**	👎**Not recommended**
ignore	blind to, deaf to
hinder	cripple

Age-inclusive terminology

Language should respect and reflect individuals of all ages. It involves using terms that do not patronize or stereotype individuals based on their age.

👍**Recommended**	👎**Not recommended**
older adults	elderly
legacy status, preexisting	grandfathered

Non-inclusive language on GitHub

GitHub has a prominent position within the technology and open-source communities. As a central hub for software development and collaboration, the language used on the platform has a significant impact and can reflect broader trends within the tech industry. Examining GitHub repositories offers a tangible and accessible source of real-world examples of how inclusive and non-inclusive language manifests in a technical context.

To illustrate how inclusive language principles can be applied in practice, this section provides real-world examples of non-inclusive terms found on GitHub. For each example, a more inclusive alternative will be suggested.

Master/slave

While often used to describe a controlling element and a dependent element, these terms recall historical contexts of oppression.

❌ **What was found on GitHub:**

> Guarantee of data consistency among cluster nodes: replacing loss-less semi-sync between MySQL **master** and MySQL **slaves** with Paxos, PhxSQL

> ensures zero-loss binlogs between **master and slaves** and supports linearizable consistency, which is as strong as that of Zookeeper.

✅ **A more inclusive option:**

> Guarantee of data consistency among cluster nodes: replacing loss-less semi-sync between MySQL **primary** and MySQL **replicas** with Paxos, PhxSQL ensures zero-loss binlogs between **primary and replicas** and supports linearizable consistency, which is as strong as that of Zookeeper.

❌ **What was found on GitHub:**

> The project consists steps for web application deployment on kubernetes cluster using jenkins dynamic **slave node**. The project is implemented on minikube i.e single node Kubernetes Cluster. It involves configuration of Cloud in Jenkins Server i.e dynamic **slave node**.

✅ **A more inclusive option:**

> The project consists of steps for web application deployment on a Kubernetes cluster using Jenkins dynamic **agent node**. The project is implemented on Minikube, i.e., a single-node Kubernetes cluster. It involves configuration of Cloud in Jenkins Server, i.e., dynamic **agent node**.

Whitelist/blacklist

While often used to describe the functionality of blocking or allowing certain items, these terms suggest negative things should be associated with ‘black’ and positive with ‘white,’ which can carry racial implications.

❌ **What was found on GitHub:**

> In directory levels you can find preprocessed raw IP lists based on number of **blacklist** occurrences (e.g. levels/3.txt holds IP addresses that can be found on 3 or more **blacklists**).

✅ **A more inclusive option:**

> In directory levels, you can find preprocessed raw IP lists based on the number of **blocklist** occurrences (e.g., levels/3.txt holds IP addresses that can be found on 3 or more **blocklists**).

Sanity check

While often used to describe a quick mental overview, this term can reinforce the notion that individuals with mental health challenges are inferior or flawed.

❌ **What was found on GitHub:**

> modelChecker is a python plug-in written for Autodesk Maya to **sanity check** digital polygon models. It is unopinionated, provides concise reporting, and lets you select your error nodes easily.

✅ **A more inclusive option:**

> modelChecker is a python plug-in written for Autodesk Maya to **validation check** digital polygon models. It is unopinionated, provides concise reporting, and lets you select your error nodes easily.

Crippled

While often used to describe software with limited functionality, this term is an ableist word that tends to be used with a negative connotation describing the disability.

❌ **What was found on GitHub:**

> A sad truth is that most decompilers out there are **crippled**. Many aren't able to decompile trivial constructs, others can't decompile more advanced, those which seemingly can deal with them, are **crippled** by supporting only the boring architectures and OSes.

✅ **A more inclusive option:**

> The unfortunate truth is that many decompilers are **limited in functionality**. Some cannot handle simple constructs, while others struggle with advanced ones. Decompilers that manage these complexities often **only support a narrow range** of architectures and operating systems.

✅ ✅ **Or you can go a step further and use plain language principles to improve the text even more:**

> Many decompilers **aren't very functional**. Some fail with simple tasks, while others can't manage complex ones. Even those that can handle these tasks often **work only with a limited set** of computer architectures and operating systems.

Implementation guide

For individuals writers

Audit

Conduct a personal audit of your existing documentation to identify non-inclusive language. Tools like Grammarly and Textio can help spot potentially problematic language, allowing you to revise accordingly.

Self-education

Engage in self-guided learning about inclusive language principles. This might include researching real-life examples or case studies to see the impact of language choices.

Practice through writing

Use interactive online workshops or forums to practice language changes and understand their impact in a real-world context. Engaging in discussions can also enhance learning.

Develop personal guidelines

Create a personal style guide that emphasizes inclusive language. This guide should include specific dos and don'ts tailored to your writing style and context.

Seek feedback

Encourage feedback from peers or online writing communities. This can provide diverse perspectives on the inclusivity of your writing.

For organisations

Audit

Perform a comprehensive audit of all existing content, identifying areas that include non-inclusive language. Use tools like Grammarly or Textio to assist in spotting problematic language.

Training programs

Develop and conduct regular training sessions focused on inclusive language principles. These sessions can include real-life scenarios to practice language changes and understand their impact.

Utilize interactive workshops that provide role-playing exercises or discussions to engage participants in learning.

Inclusive language guidelines

Create or update a style guide that includes a section dedicated to inclusive language. This should outline specific dos and don'ts tailored to your organization's context.

Feedback mechanisms

Establish channels such as focus groups or surveys to get feedback from diverse stakeholders regarding the inclusivity of your communications.

Encourage an open-door policy where anyone can raise concerns or suggest changes about language use.

Regular reviews and updates

Implement a schedule for regular review and updating of materials to ensure they remain inclusive as societal norms and language evolve.

Common challenges and solutions in implementing inclusive language

For individual writers

Unfamiliarity with inclusive language

Challenge	Solution
You may not be familiar with which terms are considered non-inclusive or may feel unsure about the current standards for inclusive communication.	Engage in ongoing learning by consulting style guides, attending workshops, and using digital writing tools that highlight non-inclusive language. Referencing examples and recommended alternatives can help build familiarity over time.

Fear of being corrected or criticized

Challenge	Solution
You might hesitate to use inclusive language out of fear of making mistakes or being publicly corrected.	Adopt a growth mindset and treat inclusive language as a skill that improves with practice. Seek constructive feedback from diverse peers and view corrections as opportunities to learn and improve.

Difficulty changing established habits

Challenge	Solution
You may find it challenging to break long-standing communication habits and adopt more inclusive alternatives.	Develop personal guidelines and reminders to reinforce inclusive habits. Practice rewriting sentences using inclusive alternatives to internalize the changes over time.

Inconsistent use

Challenge	Solution
You may struggle to apply inclusive language consistently across different types of communication.	Create checklists or use editing tools that support bias-free language. Reviewing written content before sharing or publishing can help catch inconsistencies and ensure alignment with inclusive language principles.

For organisations

Resistance to change

Challenge	Solution
People may be resistant to altering their communication habits or skeptical about the necessity of change.	Implement change management strategies that include education on the benefits of inclusive language, providing clear examples of its impact on business outcomes and workplace culture.

Lack of awareness and understanding

Challenge	Solution

There may be a general lack of understanding about what constitutes inclusive language.	Conduct educational workshops and training sessions that specifically address what inclusive language is and its importance. Provide tangible examples and practical usage scenarios.

Consistent application

Challenge	Solution
Ensuring consistency in the application of inclusive language across all communications and materials.	Develop comprehensive style guides and best practice documents that serve as references, and appoint diversity leaders within the organization to oversee adherence.

Updating existing materials

Challenge	Solution
The task of reviewing and updating existing materials to align with inclusive language principles can be daunting.	Prioritize materials that are most visible or frequently used, and create a phased plan to update documents gradually. Utilize tools that can aid the transformation, such as writing software with inclusivity settings.

Fear of making mistakes

Challenge	Solution
Individuals may fear using the wrong terms or being criticized for unintentional errors.	Foster a supportive environment where learning and feedback are encouraged. Encourage open discussions and provide training sessions addressing common mistakes and how to correct them.

Real life examples of implementation

Apple

Apple has made significant strides in promoting inclusive language within the tech industry. The company has revamped its coding terminology to remove phrases with historically racist connotations, such as replacing “blacklist” and “whitelist” with “deny list” and “allow list,” respectively. Furthermore, Apple has substituted “master” and “slave” with “primary” and “secondary” to describe device relationships, effectively removing terms that hint at subjugation or control. Their guide now explicitly calls it “Inclusive Language” instead of “Fair Language,” emphasizing their commitment to inclusivity.

Salesforce

Salesforce has implemented a comprehensive strategy to integrate inclusive language across all corporate sectors, not just coding. By establishing an advisory board that includes corporate leaders, employees, and members of Employee Resource Groups, Salesforce ensures diverse perspectives are considered. Their Inclusive Product Language team systematically evaluates language decisions, guided by principles such as Representation and Historical Context, to recommend more inclusive alternatives.

Microsoft

Microsoft has actively integrated inclusive language into their communication methods. Their comprehensive style guide includes a bias-free section emphasizing gender-neutral and person-first language. Microsoft also integrates inclusive tools within Microsoft Word, which suggest edits to ensure communications remain neutral and respectful, avoiding stereotypes in product naming. They reinforce these principles through employee education programs, encompassing training and practical resources.

Google

Google has been proactive in fostering inclusivity across various aspects of its operations. Beyond their “Write inclusive documentation” guide, the company continually enhances accessibility features in its products. For example, they have improved Google Meet’s live captioning and developed the ChromeVox screen reader for better web navigation accessibility.

Additional resources

To explore industry guidelines that aid in adopting inclusive language strategies, consider the following resources:

W3C – Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)

While primarily focused on web accessibility, these guidelines emphasize inclusive language to improve online content accessibility for all users, including those with disabilities.

The Conscious Style Guide

The guide provides access to a variety of style guides regarding terminology for different communities, alongside articles that debate language usage.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Style

Offers guidance on bias-free language across different dimensions of identity and background.

Atlassian's Inclusive Language Guide

The guide includes specific examples and guidelines for avoiding gendered language, recognizing cultural sensitivities, and choosing words with care to foster inclusion.

Microsoft's Writing Style Guide

The Microsoft Writing Style Guide includes a dedicated section on bias-free language, emphasizing the use of gender-neutral and person-first language.

Google's Developer Documentation Style Guide

Google's Developer Documentation Style Guide includes the 'Write inclusive documentation' section, which offers best practices for using inclusive language.