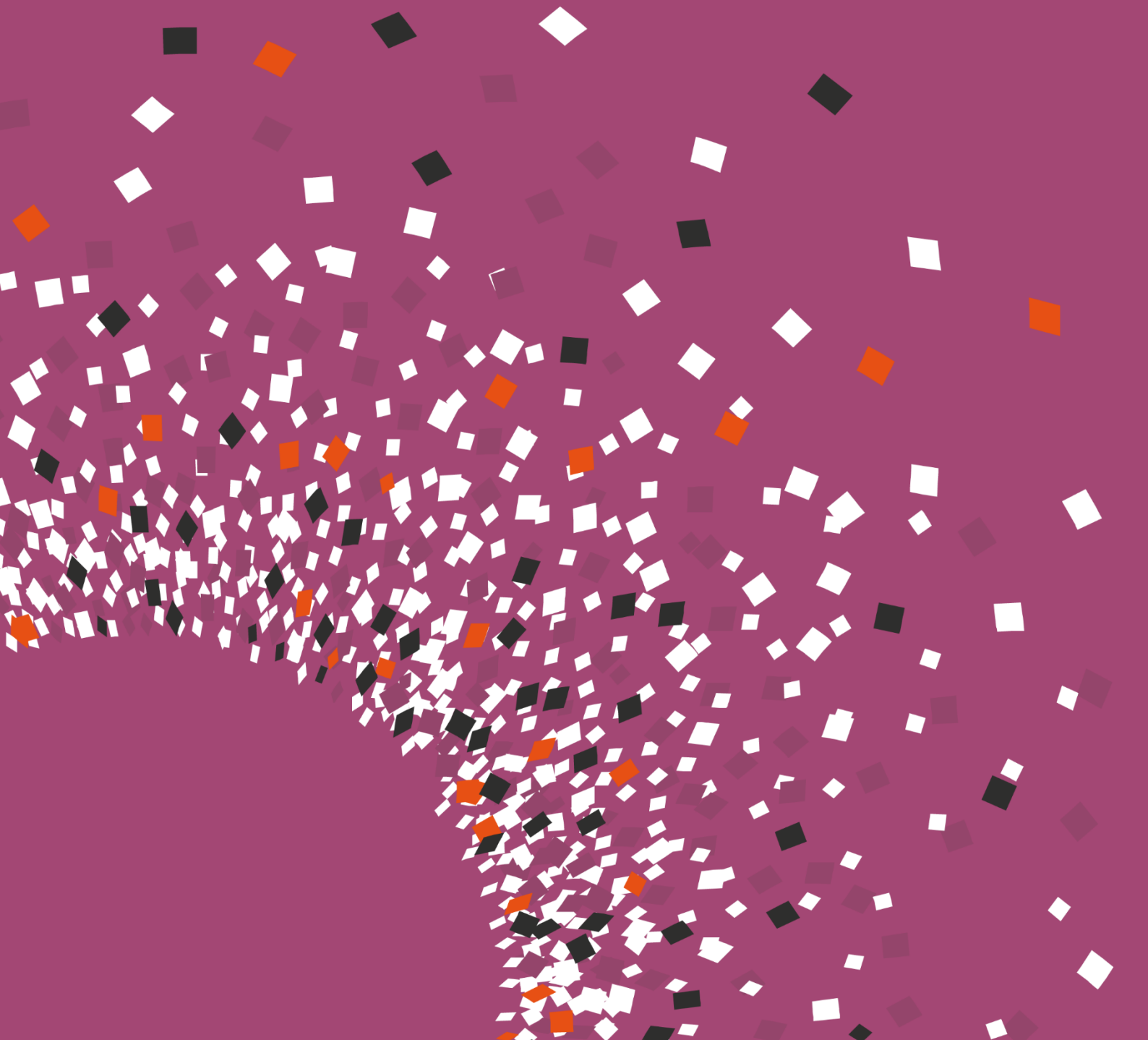


MRS Senior Client Council

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION BEST PRACTICE GUIDES: USE OF LANGUAGE

Updated July 2024



Introduction

This guidance provides a client perspective on inclusion and has been prepared by members of the MRS Senior Client Council and client colleagues.

The MRS Code of Conduct requires transparent information about which sampling characteristics and parameters have been used when defining samples as representative of segments of the population, such as when reporting Nationally Representative samples. For detailed guidance on the ethical and legal issues, including MRS Code of Conduct requirements, please refer to the following:

- [MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Sample Data on Sexual Orientation](#)
- [MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Data on Sex and Gender](#)
- [MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Sample Data on Physical disabilities and/or mental health conditions](#)
- [MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Ethnicity Sample Data](#)

For further advice about client-side inclusion issues, it is recommended that the following MRS Senior Client Council guidelines are referred to in conjunction with this document:

- [Diversity & Inclusion Best Practice Guides: Working with Research Agencies and Suppliers to Ensure Inclusive Samples](#)
- [Diversity & Inclusion Best Practice Guides: Accessibility by Design](#)
- [Diversity & Inclusion Best Practice Guides: Sampling Methods](#)
- [Diversity & Inclusion Best Practice Guides: Use of Different Methods](#)

Best use of language

- **Use plain language** – avoid acronyms and jargon because they may not always translate the same for all participants. Using plain language will help your message be easily understood by the broader audience. Idioms (e.g., phrases such as 'up in the air' or 'think big'), jargon (e.g., phrases such as 'blue sky thinking'), and acronyms (e.g., business specific acronyms) can exclude a person who may not have specialised knowledge and that can impede effective communication. If acronyms are being used, explain these clearly at the beginning.
- **Avoid clichés or colloquialisms that may be specific to any geography, profession, culture etc.** as they may alienate or even offend people if the words or phrases do not translate with the same meaning
- **Avoid perpetuating stereotypes or biases** and of making assumptions regarding personal characteristics such as gender and ethnicity, for example
 - In quantitative surveys use gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/person/people) when talking about people to avoid associating them with a gender that they might not associate with
 - For qualitative research ask how individuals prefer to be addressed/how they prefer to describe themselves
 - NB. Using they/them and asking a person their preference is best practice in general, not just in research
- **Make presentations/research more accessible** – use the accessibility guidelines for the medium you are working with; This includes ensuring fonts are large enough and in legible colours, using alt text for images and subtitles for presentation.
- **Avoid using the word “diverse” to describe a person or people** - a single person cannot be diverse. Referring to a person as “diverse” is increasingly used as code for people who belong to groups considered non-dominant which in turn makes them an 'other'.
 - Other” in isolation should not be used in general
 - Include an option to self-define, e.g. 'other gender identity...'

- Give feedback to source authors when language is not inclusive
- Remember to include inclusive imagery to support your inclusive language

It is always a good idea to find out how people prefer to describe themselves and use those terms, rather than making assumptions

Regarding Physical Disabilities and Mental Health Conditions

- The word 'disabled' is a description and not a group of people. Use 'disabled people' not 'the disabled' as the collective term. The same is true when referring to physical health conditions, for example use 'person with diabetes' rather than 'diabetic'.
- Avoid medical labels as they say little about people as individuals and tend to reinforce stereotypes of disabled people as 'patients' or unwell.
- Don't automatically refer to 'disabled people' in all communications – many people who need disability benefits and services don't identify with this term. Consider using 'people with physical and mental health conditions or impairments' if it seems more appropriate.
- Avoid phrases like 'suffers from' which suggest discomfort, constant pain, and a sense of hopelessness.
- Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example 'deaf to our pleas' or 'blind drunk'.
- Avoid passive, victim words (for example 'suffering from', 'ailment' or 'problem'). Use language that respects disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives.
- Certain ways of talking about mental illness can alienate members of the community, sensationalise the issue, and contribute to stigma and discrimination.

Terms to avoid	Suggested alternatives
<p>When producing corporate documentation, avoid using the phrase 'people with a disability', 'employees with disability' or 'customers with a disability'</p>	<p>Instead use the phrases 'disabled people', 'disabled employees' and 'disabled customers' – this is the Social Model of Disability.</p> <p>This model takes the view that a person does not <i>'have'</i> a disability, and disability is something a person experiences because society and individuals have failed to consider the impairments people might have, and their associated needs. For example, a person is not prevented from going to see a play because they use a wheelchair, rather it is the absence of accessible transport and access to venues that causes the disability and exclusion</p> <p>Examples of terms to use (NB. This list is non-exhaustive):</p> <p>'wheelchair user'</p> <p>'with a learning disability' (singular) 'with learning disabilities' (plural)</p> <p>'disabled person'</p> <p>'person with cerebral palsy'</p> <p>'person with a mental health condition'</p> <p>'deaf', 'user of British Sign Language (BSL)', 'person with a hearing impairment'</p> <p>'people with visual impairments', 'blind people', 'blind and partially sighted people'</p> <p>'person with epilepsy', 'person with diabetes' or 'someone who has epilepsy or diabetes or depression'</p> <p>It is also important to note that individuals may still have a personal preference about how they refer to themselves, their family, friends and colleagues and we should respect this preference in conversations, personal articles etc. It is always a good idea to find out how people prefer to describe themselves.</p>
<p>'(the) handicapped', '(the) disabled'. For example, <i>'the handicapped will sit over there'</i>. These terms have negative connotations</p>	<p>'Disabled (people)'</p>

'Afflicted by', 'suffer from', 'victim of', 'has a problem' 'Has (name of condition or impairment)', for example, 'they have epilepsy' as this is factual

For example, '*he suffers from epilepsy*'. This sounds judgmental

'able-bodied'

'Non-disabled'

'fits', 'spells', 'attack'

'seizures'

'Mental handicap'

'Learning disability'

Suggested terms for mental health conditions

A person is 'living with' or 'has a diagnosis of' mental health condition

A person is 'being treated for' or 'someone with' a mental health condition

A person has a 'diagnosis of' or 'is being treated for' schizophrenia

See [the MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Sample Data on Physical and/or Mental Health Conditions](#) for more information about the legal and ethical issues

Regarding Neurodiversity

- The term 'Neurodiversity' refers to the biological principle that people are all different in the way we process and communicate information, or neurocognitive function and behaviour. Neurodiversity also covers specific areas such as Autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD.
- The term 'Neurodivergence' refers to neurocognitive function which is different from what is seen as 'Neurotypical'.
- The term 'Neurotypical' refers to people not displaying or characterized by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour. 'Neurotypical' individuals often assume that their experience of the world is either the only one or the only correct one but this is not correct – it's important to be aware of your biases if you do identify as 'Neurotypical'.
- People with neurodivergent identities may prefer to refer to the neurodiversity in person-first language (i.e., 'a person with Autism') or identity-first language (i.e., 'an Autistic person'). It is important to identify their preferred language, it's always best to ask.
- Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) is a term that describes differences or difficulties with aspects of learning (such as dyslexia and ADD). These difficulties can affect the way a person learns or processes information and their ability to work with spoken or written language. SpLDs can also affect the organisation of a person's movements.

Regarding Gender

- Use 'Ms' instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs' unless you know the marital status of an individual or have confirmation of how they would prefer to be referred to.
 - A new gender-neutral title 'Mx' is now being widely used by the Government and many businesses in the UK.
- Terms like 'policeman' imply that the occupation is exclusively male. Use terms such as 'police officer', 'firefighter' and 'sales person'.
- There are three common gender pronouns: 1) she/her/hers 2) he/him/his 3) they/them/theirs Use 'they' (rather than his or her) when unsure of someone's pronouns. Some people may prefer to use multiple pronouns, whilst others may prefer none. It is okay to ask which gender pronouns they identify with, we advise starting by offering your own: for example, "Hi, I'm Sam, and I use she/her/hers pronouns. What about you?".
- Biological sex refers to a person's physical anatomy. In most cases the terms male and female will cover biological sex but there are a range of other variations in anatomy and chromosomal makeup which will require an additional classification such as intersex. Intersex refers to a range of physical, hormonal, or genetic features, present but not necessarily evident at birth, which are neither wholly female nor wholly male or are a combination of female and male
- Gender and gender identity is complicated. It is the way that an individual describes themselves and identifies with a gender category. A person's identity may or may not correspond with their biological sex and is quite separate and distinct from their sexual orientation. It is also not fully covered by the standard Male and Female categories. The wide range of non-binary gender identities means that some people may identify as male or female and some may identify with an alternative third option gender identity such as transgender. Other identities may include polygender, intergender, nongender, agender or transsexual. In short, gender identity may not be static, and it can be complex.
- Transgender is a term generally used to refer to transgender or transsexual people where a person's gender identity differs from their sex recorded at birth.
- Avoid describing someone as trans unless that is how the person identifies and is comfortable with sharing. Do not try and compliment them by drawing attention to them being trans person.

Terms to avoid**Suggested alternatives**

Avoid referring to women as **females** unless capturing biological gender

The word 'female' is an adjective and refers to something that belongs or relates to women. For example, a female director, female audience, female roles.

When capturing biological gender, female is an accepted term.

In other instances, the recommendation is to use **woman** or **women**

Avoid making assumptions about the **pronouns** people use to describe themselves

Some people prefer to describe themselves using **gender-neutral pronouns**.

Aim to use gender-neutral pronouns when talking about people to avoid associating them with a specific gender e.g. 'She/her' or 'He/Him' that they might object to.

'They/ them/ their' are the most commonly used gender neutral pronouns and can be used when you do not know someone's pronouns and are not able to ask.

For example: *"Sam left their book at home,so they're driving back to get it" or "I had a great time talking to Georgie today. I really respect them and their opinions."*

When possible, ask politely how a person prefers to be addressed and how they prefer to describe themselves.

It is also helpful to display your preferred pronouns, so others feel comfortable enough to share their preferred pronouns.

See the [MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Data on Sex and Gender](#) for more information about the legal and ethical issues

Regarding Sexual Orientation

- Try not to make assumptions about the gender of someone's partner or erase LGBTQIA+ couples with your language e.g., "feel free to bring your husbands and wives." Instead, use "feel free to bring your spouses or partners".
- 'Queer' is sometimes used as an umbrella term to refer to all people with non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Although it is a reclaimed term within the LGBTQIA+ community, it is still considered offensive to many and should only be used if necessary and appropriate. Ask how people want to be identified and be sensitive to differences in comfort levels.
- When talking about sexual orientation always talk about communities (plural). LGBTQ+ is a group of communities, not one community).

Terms to avoid	Suggested alternatives
Avoid using the term ' Homosexual ' to describe people	This is because the term ' gay ' is now more generally used.
It is advisable to avoid referring to a same-sex couple as a ' homosexual couple ' or characterising their relationship as a ' homosexual relationship '	It is preferable to use ' relationship ', ' couple ' (or, if necessary, 'gay couple').
Avoid using the term ' sexual preference ' as this suggests that being lesbian, gay or bisexual is a choice.	Sexual orientation is the accurate description of an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex and is inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, as well as straight men and women.
It is advisable to avoid using the general terms like ' gay lifestyle ' or ' homosexual lifestyle '.	It is best to use terms like ' gay lives ' or ' gay and lesbian lives '. There is no single lesbian, gay or bisexual lifestyle.
Avoid using the terms ' gay agenda ' or	It is best to use accurate descriptions

'homosexual agenda'.

like **'working to ensure people are not discriminated against because of their sexual orientation'.**

Notions of a so-called 'homosexual agenda' create a climate of fear and distrust.

See the [MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Sample Data on Sexual Orientation](#) for more information about the legal and ethical issues

Regarding Race and Ethnicity

- “Race” is usually associated with biology and linked with physical characteristics such as skin colour or hair texture. “Ethnicity” is linked with cultural expression and identification. However, both are social constructs used to categorize and characterise populations.
- Since ethnicity is a multifaceted and changing phenomenon, various possible ways of measuring ethnic groups are available and have been used over time. These include country of birth, nationality, language spoken at home, skin colour (an aspect for consideration for some and not for others), national/geographical origin and religion. What seems to be generally accepted, however, is that ethnicity includes all these aspects, and others, in combination.
- Do not make assumptions about someone's national origin based on their appearance.
- The terms ‘BAME’ or ‘BME’ should not be used as a catch all for non-white ethnicities.
- There are a number of terms for different ethnicities and nationalities and different people will prefer and use different descriptors. It is best to ask what a person identifies with. For example, ‘Black’ vs ‘African-American’ or ‘Latinx’ vs ‘Latina’.
- People can have multiple racial and ethnic identities that may not be obvious based on appearance. Do not assume that a person’s skin complexion/appearance defines their nationality or cultural background.
- Representation - when using stock photos, try to strike a balance between intentionally including people of colour in images, and also being conscious of the context and not reinforcing stereotypes, for example, equating poverty with people of colour. It is important to rule out token efforts or gestures as they do more harm than good.
- The word ‘blacklisting’ along with ‘whitelisting’ reinforces the bias that black is bad and white is good.

Terms to avoid

Avoid **making assumptions about people’s ethnicity**. For example, making assumptions based on a person’s appearance that they are

Suggested alternatives

Aim to understand how individuals prefer to be addressed and how they prefer to describe themselves.

Indian.

It is advisable to avoid **making assumptions about people's nationality**. For example, making assumptions that a Black or Asian person is not British.

This is an example of a micro-aggression. Aim to find out more about individuals.

In the UK, avoid using the term **'BAME'** which stands for 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic' people and groups.

This is because it groups everyone who is not White into one group, ignoring that people have different lived experiences and disparate cultural backgrounds

If the people come from a wide range of backgrounds, best use the term ethnic minority people or groups. You can also refer to people as 'from ethnic minority backgrounds' instead.

It is always a good idea to find out how people prefer to describe themselves.

Referring to people as **'Non-White'** means that you are defining people in relation to the White population, thus ignoring their unique identities and possibly presenting them as less important

You can use the term **'ethnic minority people or groups'** – or **'people from ethnic minority backgrounds'**. It is even better to find out how people prefer to describe themselves.

Avoid referring to people from a Black Caribbean or African background as **'Blacks'** or **'the Blacks'**.

You can refer to people from a Black Caribbean or African background as **'Black people'** or acknowledge their backgrounds.

In the UK, avoid using the term **'people of colour'** when referring to people from ethnic minority backgrounds as this term excludes White minority groups like the Irish traveller ethnic group.

Best use the term **ethnic minority people or groups** – or **'people from ethnic minority backgrounds'** instead.

Avoid using the terms **'Mixed people'** or **'Mixed race people'**. Even though we come from different cultural backgrounds, with different shades of skin colour, there is only one human race.

Best to use **'people with a Mixed ethnic background'** or 'people from a Mixed ethnic group'.

Avoid **making assumptions about**

Aim to understand how individuals

people's ethnicity. For example, making assumptions based on a person's appearance that they are Indian.

prefer to be addressed and how they prefer to describe themselves.

See [the MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Ethnicity Sample Data](#) for more information about the legal and ethical issues

Regarding Social Inclusion

- People can make assumptions based on where someone lives and their perceived economic status. These assumptions can in turn lead to harmful language based on cultural stereotypes and historic events. Many slang words and idioms can also reference socio-economic status.
- Avoid language that frames the person as a problem rather than the challenging situation they find themselves in. For example, “person with drug issues” is better than ‘druggie’, and “people with low-incomes” is better than ‘poor people’.
- Inclusive language related to socio-economic status should:
 - Treat all people fairly, regardless of where they’re from or what they do.
 - Avoid negative terms based on where someone’s from or what they do.
 - Only be mentioned (without judgment) when relevant to a discussion.

Terms to avoid

Suggested alternatives

At-risk, needy, disadvantaged

People with low income

The poor

People experiencing poverty

The homeless

People experiencing homelessness,
people who are homeless

Regarding Age

- Age-inclusive language should avoid referring to someone's age, unless relevant and necessary to the context. It should recognize people for why they are and their individual characteristics, and not draw correlations or assumptions because of their age.
- Similarly, language that stereotypes or implies that a particular age cohort has certain abilities or inabilities, or has stereotypical characteristics because of their age, should also be avoided.
- It is possible to wonder how a young manager would feel or cope with managing younger or older people. Instead of relating your questions to age, ask, "What skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team?".

Terms to avoid	Suggested alternatives
The elderly, the old, pensioners, "boomers", old-folks, senior citizen	Older adults, older people
The boys/girls in the office	The colleagues in the office
A young and vibrant team	A vibrant team
A mature workforce	An experienced workforce
Geriatric (to refer to people)	Ages XX and older

See [MRS Best Practice Guide: Age bands for researching over 65s](#) for more guidance

Regarding Culture/Religion

- There are different concepts of religion that can be measured, and these can include affiliation, belonging, belief and practice. It is important to be clear about what concept is being measured:
 - Religious affiliation is the connection or identification with a religion irrespective of actual practice or belief.
 - Religious belonging can be interpreted as both loose self-identification and active or formal belonging to a religious group. This can produce problems of ambiguity as some people may respond that they have a religious affiliation but not belong to a religion.
 - Religious belief includes beliefs typically expected to be held by followers of a religion and how important those beliefs are to a person's life
 - Practice includes specific religious activities expected of believers.
- Many individuals follow a religion (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Sikhism) or maintain a belief (e.g., atheism, agnosticism, humanism).
- Inclusive language refers to the use of language that is not affiliated with a particular religion or belief.
- A person's religious belief cannot be assumed by their name.
- Inclusive language should be free of any reference to one's religious practice or belief. It should not be referenced unless relevant to the context.
 - Only refer to people's religion if it's relevant to the information being communicated, for example:
 - First name, forename or given name, not Christian name
 - Names of religions and religious groups are stated in upper case
 - Groups of individuals from the same religion should be referred to as a community, such as members of the Muslim community or Jewish people

Terms to avoid	Suggested alternatives
God bless you	Bless you
Minorities	Underrepresented group
Christian name	"First name" or "full name" depending on the situation
