Part Two: Practice Equity Daily > 4. Tell stories centered on people and systems.

A STYLE GUIDE—HARNESSING LANGUAGE IN SUPPORT OF INTERSECTIONALITY AND CROSS-SECTOR POWER BUILDING[51]

INTRODUCTION

Language is a key ingredient in a winning theory of change. It can build bridges and change minds. By acknowledging its ability to shape and reflect reality, progressive campaigns can become more powerful vehicles for social change, inclusion, and justice. In fact, understanding and applying the authentic language of the individuals and communities we work with can be a revolutionary act in itself.

Historically, issue-based language guidelines have remained siloed or proprietary. Some information has trickled up (with some questionable success) to be centralized in grammar and usage style guides (e.g., APA, AP, CMS) but this information is far from comprehensive and lacks the voice of the groups being discussed. At the same time, transparent conversations about the power of word choice and phrasing have remained disconnected and difficult to access.

In 2015, Hanna Thomas led SumOfUs staff in the compilation of a new kind of guide that sparks a conversation about language among progressives. With the help of Anna Hirsch, an independent editor, "A Progressive's Style Guide" was born. We invite drivers of progressive change—community members, grassroots leaders, activists, and progressive funders—to study the vital movement frameworks, decolonizing usage, and up-to-date word choice and phrasing for current theory of change directions and momentum across groups and issue areas.

"A Progressive's Style Guide" is explicitly multi-voiced, created with the following commitments: 1) we combat discriminatory language, 2) we seek advice or more information when we're unsure, 3) when writing, speaking, or using images, we look for examples that reflect a broad range of identities and perspectives.

We understand that there may be negative blowback to this work and that we won't be the first to experience it. We affirm that we are aligned with free speech and, at the same time, are promoting thoughtfulness and openness about how language is and isn't used, has been used, and could be used for people collectively. Because language is dynamic, changes with our struggles, and is shaped by criticism and the collective construction of social justice, we're compelled to keep building a collective language that liberates us all.

As we continue to think about ways to organize this information that are accessible, user-friendly, clear, and aligned with progressives' beliefs and strategies, we know that in some instances, we still fall short—so we also invite feedback. We're committed to this work and to remaining in dialogue. Many thanks for your help and solidarity!

CENTRAL PRINCIPLES

People-first language

People-first language aims to make personhood the essential characteristic of every person. It views other descriptive social identities that people may hold as secondary and non-essential. Strict adherence to people-first language can lead to awkward sentence construction and may not align with reclamations of social identities, but we maintain that attuning to our shared humanity by telling stories that center people first, rather than exploiting identities, should be an aim of progressive writing.

Self-identification

Wherever categorization and labels are used to oppress groups of people, self-identification becomes an act of resistance. At the same time, people who are robbed of opportunities to self-identify lose not just words that carry political power, but aspects of their culture, agency, and spirit. Progressive writing, as much as possible, should strive to include language that reflects peoples' choice and style in how they talk about themselves. If you aren't sure, ask.

Active voice

A grammatical voice in many languages, active voice puts the "actor" of the sentence in the role of performing the action. Often lauded for contributing to more dynamic writing, active voice may also be key to naming perpetrators of violence and harm directly. Writers should use the opportunity to scan for active voice to root out implicit bias toward status quo systems of power by naming the actors of oppression, whether human, institutional, or cultural.

Proper nouns

Names used for and by individual places, persons, and organizations convey respect, understanding, acceptance, and clarity. At the same time, common nouns and pronouns can dilute an issue or simply create confusion. While conversational tone is often used in campaign writing, great care should be taken to avoid misleading readers. For example, overuse of words such as "it," "that," and "this" may leave the reader wondering who the writer is talking about at a critical point in the story.

[51]This is an excerpt from "A Progressive's Style Guide," Hannah Thomas, SumOfUs.org and Anna Hirsch, ActivistEditor.com. Permission to reprint granted under Creative Commons license. The full guide includes guidance on age, disability, economy, environment/science, food, gender/sex, geopolitics, health, housing/space, immigration/refugees, indigeneity/ancestry, police/incarceration, race/ethnicity, and sexual and domestic violence. https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.sumofus.org/images/SUMOFUS_PROGRESSIVE-STYLEGUIDE.pdf

Part Two: Practice Equity Daily > 4. Tell stories centered on people and systems.

A STYLE GUIDE—HARNESSING LANGUAGE IN SUPPORT OF INTERSECTIONALITY AND CROSS-SECTOR POWER BUILDING, CONT.[51]

RACE/ETHNICITY
Writing guidelines

Racism, in order to be dismantled, must be uprooted at every level, from the foundations of institutions that dictate the practices and policies enacted by personnel to the attitudes and beliefs that we reinforce through repeated social interactions and deeply internalized messages. Reclaiming power from racist systems takes a willingness to come to the conversation with curiosity, openness, and a willingness to get it wrong without letting that stop us from continuing to try to understand and do better.

Language that suggests a capacity to step outside default roles to hear and support folks who have been hurt and limited by racism is necessary. Stories and terms that are meaningful to folks in developing their identities and building power will change what's possible in fights to end racism, and will help win.

Specific recommendations

- Tell stories from the perspective of the community being represented rather than through the lens of the dominant power brokers. Centering the perspective of marginalized groups will often require an education in common underlying assumptions. Actively seek out this information.

- Understand what race, racism, racial identity, ethnicity, ethnic oppression, and ethnic identity are.

- Avoid references that draw undue attention to ethnic backgrounds or racial identities. When references are valid, learn the most appropriate specific terminology or use the term preferred by the person or group concerned. Also, remember to mention the race or color of white people as well.

- Capitalize the proper names of ancestral, national, place, and religious identities—for example, Indigenous Peoples, Arab, FrenchCanadian, Inuit, Jew, Latin, Asian, Cree.

- Combining names of continents is a common way of identifying someone's ancestry (e.g., African American, AfroCuban, Eurasian.) These should be capitalized. These are also sometimes used to indicate race; however, there are problems with using these descriptors as analogues for racial identities. Describing a person who is Black and lives in Canada as African American may create inaccuracies if they don't self-identify culturally as African, if they do self-identify as Canadian, or if they're white, born in Africa, and recently moved to Canada.

- Try saying "a Black person" or "a person of color" instead of "an African American" or "a Black." At the same time, some groups will prefer the former terminology, and it will still be important to use language used by the people being represented.

- Note: "person of color" and "Black" are not synonymous, however. Also, "person of color" and "immigrant" are not synonymous.

- Consider your audience when deciding to capitalize Black/White. Sometimes they are lowercased. Follow the lead of your constituencies, set a consistent house style, and follow it.

- Avoid vocabulary that extends negative racial, ethnic, or cultural connotations and avoid usage that carries hierarchical valuation or portrays groups of people as inferior, bad, criminal, or less valued than others. At times, such language may be difficult to perceive from the point of view of an oppressor group. Don't assume you know all the ways that a phrasing may land. Take the time to check it out with others.

- Using "minority" may imply inferior social position and is often relative to geographic location. When needed, the use of "minority ethnic group" may be preferred over "minority group." "Minorities" are actually 85% of the world population and make up the global majority.

- Note that "racial minority" or "visible minority" typically describe people who are not white; "ethnic minority" refers to people whose ancestry is not English or Anglo-Saxon and "linguistic minority" refers to people whose first language is not English (or not French in Quebec).

- Avoid generalizations based on race or ethnicity, including common expressions with a history rooted in oppression.

- Don't define a person's appearance based primarily on their nationality or cultural background.

Resources

- America Healing, Racial Equity Resource Guide: Glossary

- Global Sociology, Glossary

- Four Lessons from the Media's Conflicted Coverage of Race

- Racial Equity Tools Glossary

- Cultural Appropriation

Part Two: Practice Equity Daily > 4. Tell stories centered on people and systems.

A STYLE GUIDE—HARNESSING LANGUAGE IN SUPPORT OF INTERSECTIONALITY AND CROSS-SECTOR POWER BUILDING, CONT.[51]

TERMS USED BY RACIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS	TERMS AVOIDED AND QUESTIONED BY RACIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS
Bias	Caucasian
bigotry	colorblind
Black	diverse
Black cultural appropriation	ghetto (especially as an adv. or adj.)
culture	grandfathered in
ethnic minority	gyp, gypped
linguistic minority	minority
microaggression	multicultural
oppression, internalized oppression	Oriental
person, people of color (with consideration)	post-racial
polite white supremacy	races, subspecies
prejudice, discrimination	radicalized
racial minority	thug
racism	you people, those people
visible minority	
white supremacy (white privilege is still used)	