REN-ISAC

TLP:CLEAR

Using Inclusive Language in IT

REN-ISAC is a community of professionals coming together to achieve a common goal: strengthen the information security structure of research and education institutions. The language we use as a community is important to who we are and how we are perceived. Over the years, some IT technical jargon and professional shorthand developed that [may] have highly negative connotations.

For that reason, the REN-ISAC is encouraging our member institutions and member representatives to create a more inclusive professional community through using more inclusive language. The following guidelines provide alternatives for problematic words and phrases, especially those frequently used in a professional technology environment.

- Avoiding Ableist Language
- Avoiding Ageist Language
- Avoiding Loaded Terminology
- Pronoun Usage and Gender
- Additional Resources

Inclusive Language is a Process

This document provides suggested guidelines for the language of disability, age, race, culture, gender, etc. The terms and phrases below have been chosen because they lessen the chance for unintended micro-aggressions in a professional setting. We understand, however, that the individuals may have personal language preferences, and no guidance will fit all people and all preferences.

While the REN-ISAC has worked to create a full listing of language alternatives, we readily admit that creating a new, more inclusive professional vocabulary takes time and collaboration. If you have comments, questions, or suggestions, please email us at membership@ren-isac.net.

Avoiding Ableist Language

When referring to a person with a disability, it is best to use the terms the individual you are speaking or referring to prefers, but when preference is unknown or undeclared, use person-first, not ability- or disability-first, terminology.

Avoid	Preferred
able-bodied, healthy	without disabilities
affected by, stricken with, suffers from, a victim of, an epileptic	has multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, a seizure disorder, or muscular dystrophy
crippled, lame	has limited mobility, has a mobility or physical disability
confined to a wheelchair	uses a wheelchair
disabled, impaired	person with visual impairment, person who is blind (etc)

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dumb, mute	is unable to speak, uses synthetic speech
hearing-impaired	deaf or hard-of-hearing
maimed, missing a limb	person with a prosthetic limb, person without a limb
mentally handicapped, differently abled, slow learner	cognitive disabilities, developmental disabilities
sight-impaired, vision-impaired	blind, has low vision

Often, references to disabilities are used metaphorically to negatively remark on a situation or event, such as "Due to the attack, the system was crippled," or "Hey, can you do a sanity-check on this for me?" This type of language equates physical, mental, and psychological disabilities with bad or aberrant qualities and thus can be harming and upsetting. Writing best practices include avoiding disability-based metaphors.

Avoid	Preferred
abnormal	atypical
blind to, deaf to	ignore
cripple	hinder
crippled	broken
dumb	undesirable, uncool
dummy value	placeholder value, sample value
lame	undesirable, uncool
normal	typical
mute	gone silent
sanity check	quick check, confidence check, coherence check
tone deaf	inconsiderate, thoughtless, careless

Avoiding Ageist Language

Ageist language shows up quite often in more relaxed technical discourse, especially when the speaker assumes the person's age tells the speaker something about the person's technological knowledge. When writing or speaking, avoid ageist terminology like these.

Avoid	Preferred
digital native	person who grew up with readily available computer technology
digital immigrant	person who did not grow up with readily available computer technology
grandmother/grandfather test	non-subject matter expert test

Avoiding Loaded Terminology

Information technology has a history of using terminology that is loaded with racial, cultural, and gendered bias or words the connote violence. In order to make our organization a more inclusive space for all IT professionals, we suggest using the following replacement guidelines for avoiding loaded terminology.

Avoid	Preferred
black box	functional testing, acceptance testing
black hat hacker	malicious actor, bad actor, ~~una~~uthorized user, malicious hacker, miscreant, perpetrator
blacklist	denylist, blocklist
demilitarized zone (dmz)	perimeter network
grandfathered	legacy status, preexisting
first class citizen	core concept, top-level
hacker, hack	Use *malicious hacker* to refer to an unauthorized user who accesses a system with the intent to cause harm. If the unauthorized user's intent isn't known or isn't malicious, use *unauthorized user*. Don't use *hacker* in content for a general audience. In general use, the term often has negative connotations. It's ok to use *hack* and *hacker* in content for developers or in contexts where positive outcomes are involved, such as hackathons. Don't use *hacker* to mean an amateur programmer. Don't use *hack* to mean improvising a solution to a programming problem unless the positive context is well understood.
hang	stop responding
housekeeping tasks	maintenance, upkeep
kill (a process)	forcefully halt, stop
kill two birds with one stone	feed two birds with one scone
master/slave	primary/subordinate, primary/replica, leader/follower
native feature	built-in feature
nuke	delete
off the reservation	against the grain, counterproductive
open the kimono	reveal the details, show transparency

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owner	lead, manager, expert
rule of thumb	unwritten rule, guideline, general guideline, general principle, standard
white box	glass box testing, clear box testing
white hat hacker	computer security expert
whitelist	allowlist, safelist

Pronoun Usage and Gender

One of the easiest ways to create a gender inclusive atmosphere at your organization is through thoughtful use of pronouns. When creating content, always use gender neutral pronouns when referring to an unnamed or unspecified person (examples: IoT user, malicious actor, or university student).

Avoid: Help desk scams tend to target the older technology user because **he** lacks technology skills.
Preferred: Help desk scams tend to target the older technology user because **they** lack technology skills.

When referring to a specific person, use their preferred pronouns when known. Remember, do not assume you know a person's gender based on their name or outward appearance. Offering up your own preferred pronouns is a good way to signal both your own identity and that your organization is an inclusive space.

In addition, avoid using terms that are inherently gendered, such as the following:

Avoid	Preferred
he, she	they, them
his, her	their
guys, gals	folks, team, y'all
chairman	chair, moderator, chairperson
man, mankind	humanity, people, humankind
sister organization	associated organization, partner organization
right-hand man	counterpart, indispensable
man hours, manpower	person hours, engineer hours, level of effort (hours)
man-in-the-middle	person-in-the-middle, attacker-in-the-middle
Female connector	socket
Male connector	plug

Additional Resources

Google Developer Documentation Style Guide
Microsoft Writing Style Guide
EDUCAUSE Inclusive Language Guide
Inclusive IT Language Guide—University of California Irvine

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