

## Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing

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## Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing

### Abstract

A review of *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing*, Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-free Language of the Association of American University Presses.

## Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing

Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-free Language of the Association of American University Presses. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995. (ISBN 0-253-20941-2). 100-page paperback, \$16.

Communicators in education walk a tightrope. The warning label dangling from the rope reads something like this: "If you undertake this assignment, you agree to reach and motivate your target audience. You will do so by employing words and images to which your audience can relate and respond. However, your words and your images must not be insensitive, insulting or exploitative."

No one reference book can help you keep your balance on the tightrope as you juggle content, creativity and audience diversities. *But Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* can help you stay on a steadier footing.

The generously indexed handbook divides its guidelines into five major sections: (1) Gender; (2) Race, Ethnicity, Citizenship and Nationality, and Religion; (3) Disabilities and Medical Conditions; (4) Sexual Orientation; (5) Age.

Within each section, the small volume provides more than just lists of appropriate and alternative words. Succinct suggestions and cautions provide contexts that will help you decide what to use this time and, perhaps, better prepare you for similar situations next time.

To strengthen your surefootedness in identifying what works and what does not, the editors selected missteps from a variety of sources—including university press publications. Particularly helpful are those examples and paraphrases that reflect narrow, uninformed perceptions about differences. Within each section, you can dissect offensive word choices and phrases that stepped out of their writers' myopic definition of "normal" and resultant inability to see common "default assumptions."

For example:

- "The drama of deeply blue children assuming a normal pink color after the operation . . . created a sensation."
- "Some gays in long-term relationships establish relational networks beyond the individual couple that can approach the nature of real family ties."
- "An army doctor and a woman serving as a medical specialist were killed this morning by mines as they tried to assist in taking Iraqi prisoners."

If you have been struggling to identify more respectful terms for disabilities and medical conditions, you will be relieved to find details about specific terms to use and reminders about biased reinforcers to avoid.

The guidelines' examples illustrate how easy it is to step into the "language of victimization" and the "language of disease." Though you may hear others say it, your writing—you will discover—should avoid noting that someone is "confined to a wheelchair." You may be surprised to learn that when you fall back on common identifiers such as "the invalid" or "the mental patient" you magnify a person's disability into the individual's total persona.

Generally, the guidelines recommend that all communicators focus on the individual and the issue at hand—not the difference for the difference's sake. One general rule? Sounds like a cakewalk? You realize it is not, once you page through the guidelines and recognize how commonplace—how commonly encoded in the language—these missteps are.

Keeping you focused on the ever-present tension of the tightrope will be the authors' reminder that no one can publish an up-to-date, comprehensive, bias-free guide. Language is dynamic and complex. And so are authors. These authors acknowledge that their first-edition work is neither totally objective nor complete.

Urging you to enter this "exploration of issues," they ask that you make informed choices in your daily work and that

you send them changes and challenges for their future editions.

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