[Image description: Illustration of a group of people of varying gender and racial/ethnic identities having a conversation face to face.]

Critical Language Style Guide

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Purpose

The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP Center) is the Region III Equity Assistance Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act. With the purpose to provide equity-focused technical assistance to public state agencies, districts, schools, and other responsible governmental agencies, the MAP Center must critically evaluate the use of language in both internal and external communications.

Language has the power to reinforce and perpetuate inequitable practices (Briscoe et al., 2009). Thus, developing an awareness for and use of critical language is imperative to critiquing and challenge existing power structures. Critical language seeks to (Briscoe et al., 2009, p. 31):

1. Make perceivable assumptions that normally go unexamined.
2. Recognize how language encodes social relations.
3. Identify and challenge prejudice embedded in ordinary, daily discourse practices.
4. Interrogate and redirect the nature of questions asked about schooling.
5. Raise questions that have not been asked.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance on the critical use of language as discussed by Briscoe et al. It is to be used as a framework when crafting communications, resulting in consistent portrayal of MAP Center values. This guide will discuss the MAP Center's foundational approach to language, key aspects to a critical language framework, and discussion around specific terms. Because this document is non-exhaustive, A Progressive's Style Guide by Hanna Thomas and Anna Hirsch is a recommended resource for additional information and a deeper unpacking of language.

This guidance document considers that language is cultural, and thus constantly in variance. Language has limitations that do not always account for the complexities and nuances of human experiences. Thus, in line with the MAP Center's values, this document should be updated as language and terminology evolve.

Foundational Values to Critical Language

The MAP Center is intentional in the use of language to foster critical consciousness and communities of care. With this in mind, there are two foundational values the MAP Center upholds within critical language: inclusivity and people first. The following briefly summarizes and provides examples of each approach.

Inclusivity

Inclusive language is intentional in rejecting exclusive nomenclature. Awareness of who is left out and who is centered in communications is of focus (Thomas & Hirsch, 2016). Upholding inclusion through language challenges existing social structures, fostering a society where, "all people […] participate in social, economic, cultural and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity" (United Nations, 2009). While inclusive language is a broad concept, specific examples can be found in the table below.

Inclusive	Non-inclusive
Families Family members Parents/caregivers	Parents
Students study in a place they live	Students study at home
They (singular, unless otherwise specified)	He/she
Folx People	Ladies Gentlemen

People First

People-first language emphasizes the importance of the personhood as a fundamental basis for communicating relevant information about people. Centering humanity is a foundational value of the MAP Center and is evident in the choice of leveraging people-first language as a concept.

Sentence structure is the most evident manifestation of people-first language. For instance, the phrase, Person of Color, places the person before the identity. However, the MAP Center prefers to approach people-first language more broadly, prioritizing the preferences of individuals. This can result in utilizing identity-first language.

Identity-first language places the identity first. This method rests on social identity theory where language highlights the identities of marginalized groups, fostering a sense of

community and belonging (Conlin, 2019). Identity-first language is often used by marginalized populations as a form of self-advocacy. Corresponding to the previous example, identity-first language can be seen in the phrase, Black person.

It is emphasized that the people-first language approach mentioned here is a conceptual framework that includes identity-first language. Although, it is acknowledged that applying this concept is often a choice between people- and identity-first languages. Because of this, the table below provides examples of each.

Person-First Structure	Identity-First Structure
Person with a dis/ability	Dis/abled person
Person of Color	Black person, Asian person, etc.
A person adopted by parents of another race	Transracial adoptee

Critical Language Framework

Moving beyond foundational understanding, the following section highlights four key aspects to frame the approach to critical language: specificity, context, asset-based, and system-focused.

Specificity

Individual and unique experiences are valid, and it should not be assumed that the experiences of all people are the same, as identity and experience are intersectional. Therefore, whenever possible, specificity should be prioritized. Using specific language avoids blanket statements and monolithic assumptions that fail to capture the complexity of experiences and perspectives.

Context

The purpose and meaning of a statement have the potential to alter the terminology used. Ensuring that the terminology is appropriate for the message being portrayed requires critical analysis, as reasoning behind using different terms will vary. Specific discussion pertaining to this will follow in proceeding sections.

Asset-Based

Deficit-based language assumes incapability of people often associated with marginalized status. When talking about people, re-framing assumed deficits into assets dismantles harmful narratives and empowers people.

Asset-Based	Deficit Language
Emergent bi/multilingual speaker	Limited English proficient
Developing proficiency	Low proficiency
Developing nation	Third world country

System-Focused

When talking about inequitable systems, it is important to ensure responsibility is properly identified to power structures rather than oppressed people.

Systemic Language	Attribution to Individual
Inequitable access to learning	Achievement gap
The allocation of resources is at risk of providing insufficient support for our students	We have resources for at-risk students (Toldson, 2019)
People living in dis-invested or under-resourced communities	Poor people
Enslaved people	Slaves
Historically underserved Historically marginalized Non-dominant Minoritized	Minority

Specifications by Topic Area

While language as a whole is important to consider, some specifications are imperative to explicitly highlight. Overall discussion will follow, categorized by topics of 1.) race, ethnicity, and national origin; 2.) dis/ability; and 3.) gender and sex.

Race, Ethnicity, & National Origin

Capitalization and Hyphenation

Similar to other racial groups, Latinx, Hispanic, Asian, etc., Black is to be capitalized (Daniszewski, 2020; Laws, 2020; Nguyễn & Pendleton, 2020).

There are contradictory cases to the grammatical approach of white as a race. Lowercasing white can decentralize whiteness and delegitimize false claims of systemic inequality of white people. Capitalizing white can also signal power, authority, and is commonly used by white supremacists (Laws, 2020). Conversely, there are arguments that the lowercase white assumes white is the default and dismisses white people from acknowledging their socially constructed race (Nguyễn & Pendleton, 2020).

When referencing race, hyphenation is not to be used. For example, when discussing Asian American people, the term is not to be hyphenated.

Yes	No
W/white	Caucasian
Black	black
Asian American	Asian-American

BIPOC vs. POC

Centering the experiences of the communities we talk about is of utmost importance. Thus, when choosing language in describing racially minoritized groups, nuance and critical perspective must be utilized to uphold anti-racist ideology and reject the erasure of Black and Indigenous people. This awareness is foundational in choosing to use BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) or POC (People of Color).

BIPOC is a term that works toward highlighting the unique experiences of Black and Indigenous people (Beckford, n.d.; Grady, 2020; The BIPOC Project, n.d.). It is specific to the U.S., as it centers the unique, historical violence exerted upon Black and Indigenous people in the creation and existence of America (Beckford, n.d.).

While BIPOC can be an empowering term, it is important to ensure the term is appropriate for the context. If the statement commands the acknowledgement of the differences in the experiences of Black and Indigenous people compared to the broader Population of Color, then BIPOC should be used. If the intent of the statement is to build solidarity amongst racially marginalized communities, POC can be used. Other times, specificity may supersede using BIPOC or POC. For example, police brutality disproportionately affects Black communities, thus using Black is more appropriate than BIPOC.

Overall, guidance on using BIPOC, POC, or more specific terms is determined by the intent and context of the communication.

African American vs. Black

Despite institutional entities interchangeably using Black and African American, there are nuances that differentiate these terms. African American is an ethnicity describing being descendants of enslaved people in the U.S. This refers to the shared experience of historic and dehumanizing erasure of culture and tradition of enslaved people (Beckford, n.d.). In contrast, Black is racial group referring to the broader experience of being Black in America (Beckford, n.d.). For example, one's ethnicity can be Caribbean while racially being Black.

These identities are personal, thus when necessary, it is best to know how individuals prefer to be identified. If this is not possible, using Black when referring to a racial category is best.

American Indian, Native American, Indigenous, First Nation, and Aboriginal

Corresponding with overall guidance on racial terminology, referencing specific indigenous communities is the highest standard (University of California Los Angeles, 2020), as this identity is usually the strongest amongst the community. Acknowledging that this information is not available in all cases, discussion specific to broader terminology follows.

The terminology referencing indigenous populations is attributed to historic colonization. The term Indian originated when European appropriation first occurred in North America (Marks, 2014). Because the term was imposed onto diverse groups of people, there are arguments against its use. Although, American Indian and Native Indian are terms widely positioned in U.S. laws, protecting Indian countries, reservations, and sacred sites today (Gibson, 2019; University of California Los Angeles, 2020). In a legal context, American Indian and Native Indian give indigenous people political power. Further, some in the community still identify as Indian (Pauls, 2008).

Indigenous is a broad term referencing all people existing on a land prior to colonization (Indigenous Foundations, n.d.). It is as broad as referencing someone from the Midwest as American and can unintentionally erase a variety of ethnicities.

Aboriginal and First Nation are mostly used in a Canadian context. Specifically, these terms refer to different ethnic populations, "'Aboriginal' refers to the first inhabitants of Canada, and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples […] 'First Nation' is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit" (Indigenous Foundations, n.d., para. 7).

It is important to note that Native American and First Nation omit the Inuit population, where Inuit refers to Inuit and Yupik people of Alaska (Kaplan, n.d.). Some in this population identify as Alaskan Native, as it promotes unity under a shared experience (Pauls, 2008). Further, Eskimo has been used to refer to Inuit and Yupik populations, but is an esoteric and outdated term, as it carries negative cultural connotations imposed on these groups by colonizers (Kaplan, n.d.).

Terminology referring to indigenous people will rely on context and critical understanding.

Hispanic vs. Latino/a vs. Latinx

Similar to choosing either BIPOC or POC, critical thought is fundamental in determining to use Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx, or Latine. The use of these terms is inconclusive and individually vary (American Psychological Association, 2019). A common theme emerges where those with Latin American origins identify as Latino/a while Spanish-speakers identify as Hispanic (Martinez, 2019). As a result, some identify as both Latino/a and Hispanic while others only identify as one. While this observation reflects broader trends, it is important to note that this is not entirely generalizable. Regarding Latinx, only 3% of Latino/a adults use the term (Noe-Bustamante, 2020). Another term often mentioned is Chicano, which is unique to the Mexican American community. Chicano refers to specific socio-political identities of rejecting erasure by America (Loran Maxwell, 2021).

With the preceding discussion in mind, the MAP Center often uses Latinx. While Hispanic is used by some, it can represent the erasure of Indigenous people by colonization, as it is often used to describe Spanish speaking people (Martinez, 2019; Simón, 2018). Thus, Latinx is preferred. Although, many within the Latinx community identify with their country of origin instead of Hispanic or Latinx (Garibay, et al., 2017). If possible, being specific is most preferred.

Further, Latinx is preferred over Latino/a because it is a non-gendered term, thus it is inclusive and de-centers the dichotomous ideology of gender. However, arguments against Latinx exist, as it is an Americanized term that erases the traditions of the Spanish language (Martinez, 2019). Consequently, an emergent use of Latine is occurring, as it grammatically works better with and respects traditional Spanish language (Luzmila Caraballo, 2019).

In general, Latinx is most likely to be used, although specificity is most preferred and context should be upheld.

White vs. Caucasian

Caucasian is often used to be politically correct, but because of its origins and background, the term perpetuates scientific racism.

Coined in the eighteenth century by a German anatomist, Caucasian described a group of the Caucasus Mountains (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). The anatomist found Caucasians to be physically superior and associated them with all Europeans. All other People of Color were then placed into various categories, signaling them to be "primitive" and "uncivilized." These subjective and inaccurate racial categories were adopted widely. Leveraging Caucasian also erases the myth that white people do not have a race, thus are the "normal standard," which can falsely relieve white people from acknowledging their race (McIntosh, 2019).

In summary, Caucasian should not be used in place of white.

Dis/ability

Dis/ability vs. Disability

The MAP Center uses the term dis/ability as opposed disability to intentionally emphasize that dis/ability is socially constructed through the interactions, of language, space, place, human experience, and power within a particular context (Skelton, 2019; Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2014). Although, some within the disability community reject dis/ability, as its structure can center "ability," which can signal against the concept of disability as a social construct (Wachsler, 2012). Additionally, dis/ability has not been as widely accepted outside of academia.

People-First and Identity-First

While the broad concept of people-first language is foundational to the MAP Center's approach to critical language, there is robust dialogue within the dis/ability community surrounding people- and identity-first grammatical structure specific to dis/ability that is necessary to highlight.

As aforementioned, people-first structure places emphasis on the person, placing the identity secondary. This approach rejects dis/ability as the defining feature of a person and the negative societal standards placed on those with dis/abilities (Thomas & Hirsch, 2016). Further, identity-first language can unintentionally recall outdated and offensive language (Conlin, 2019).

On the contrary, people-first structure has received criticism, as it has potential to uphold dis/ability stigma and inherently assumes the dis/ability is unfortunate (Brown, 2011). Decreasing emphasis on dis/ability can position it as a deficit (Conlin, 2019). This approach also acknowledges that dis/ability is not optional and is often an influential factor to one's identity (Brown, 2011; Liebowitz, 2015). Further, some communities have collectively decided on upholding identity-first language, such as the D/deaf and A/autistic communities (Brown, 2011; Wachsler, 2012). To understand the un/capitalization of Deaf and Autistic, please refer to the National Association of the Deaf's blog post, _Community and Culture – Frequently Asked Questions_ and activist, Sharon Wachsler's blog post, _Languaging Disability: Where Do "Ability" and "Dis/Ability" Fit In?_.

In line with the overall people-first approach, allowing those who are subjects of dialogue to determine the language used is the highest standard. If not possible, determining to choose people- or identity-first language should be approached with nuance and respect. Lastly, when referring to objects, describing them as accessible or adapted is best.

Ableist Language

Chouinard defines ableism as, "ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume ablebodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized […] and largely invisible 'others'" (1997, p. 380). In rejection of detrimental normative social constructs, the MAP Center rejects ableist language such as "leading the blind" and "emotionally crippling." Euphemisms and ableist phrases assume a problematic conception of an ideal or superior body and mind.

Non-Ableist	Ableist
Youth are well aware of issues of inequity.	Youth are not blind to issues of inequity.
That statement was a faux pas.	That statement was tone deaf.
Student with a dis/ability	Special needs student

The intersectional dis/ability activist, Lydia X. Z. Brown, has numerous resources on language in the context of dis/ability. For a robust list of ableist language, please refer to their Ableist Phrases Glossary.

Gender and Sex

LGBTQ+

As with most terminology, specificity is best. Although, when not possible, LGBTQ+ is preferred. Although it is worth noting that some argue LGBTQ+ is redundant, as the queer aspect of the acronym encompasses the same identities as the "+" (Lovannone, 2017). Despite this, to be the most inclusive, the MAP Center prefers LGBTQ+. Below is additional guidance on more specific terminology within the LGBTQ+ community.

Yes	No
Sexual orientation	Sexual preference
Lesbian sexual orientation Heterosexual sexual orientation Gay male sexual orientation Bisexual sexual orientation	Lesbianism Heterosexuality Homosexuality Bisexuality
Lesbian (n.) Gay male/man (n.) Gay person/people (n.) Gay (adj.)	Homosexual
Relationship Couple Same-sex relationship (if necessary) Gay/lesbian couple	Homosexual relations/relationship Homosexual couple
LGBTQ+ people and their lives	Gay lifestyle Homosexual lifestyle Transgender lifestyle
Out gay man Out lesbian Out queer person	Admitted homosexual Avowed homosexual
Equitable rights, equitable protection	Special rights
Transgender (adj.) Gender Nonconforming (GNC) Non-binary (NB)	A transgender (n.)
Assigned/designated male/female at birth (AMAB/AFAB)	Biologically/genetically male/female Born a man/woman

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

Disclaimer

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