

Four common words you
might want to stop using



But first...

Here's why ethical and inclusive language matters

Ensuring your writing is thoughtful, intentional and in line with the latest research is not simply "the right" thing to do. It has real-world benefits for you, your organization and for society at large. In particular, ethical and inclusive language can...

Increase trust

Research has found that using person-first language boosts trust in news among often-stigmatized groups

Improve accuracy

Stories that avoid euphemisms and don't simply repeat language from authorities are more precise

Reduce harm

Studies show that ethical language about gender, suicide and mass shootings can help media professionals avoid perpetuating stereotypes and even save lives

Even everyday words can have unintended consequences

These four might be very familiar...

Actress

Addict

Homeless

Marijuana

We'll look at the research behind each of these terms and offer alternatives so it's easy to replace them.

Actress

Why it matters

Research indicates that people who speak a language with occupational descriptions that vary by gender (such as “actor” and “actress”) are more likely to **internalize gender stereotypes**.

What to use instead

Actor

This one is a little counterintuitive, as it might seem more inclusive to avoid defaulting to the masculine form of a word. But this puts everyone, regardless of gender, on equal footing.

More examples and gender-neutral alternatives



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Use terms such as "actor," "host," "waiter," etc., for all genders: "She worked as an actor for 10 years." Sometimes, you can opt for a gender-neutral option such as "server," instead of "waiter": "All the servers were scheduled to work eight-hour shifts."

Assemblymember

Councilmember

Firefighter

Frontperson

Graduate

Letter carrier

Members of Congress

Police officer

Spokesperson

Weather forecaster

Addict

Why it matters

Though people might describe themselves as "addicts," the American Psychological Association recommends avoiding the term. And a study from the University of Texas at Austin found that the use of person-first language helps people recovering from substance use disorder feel **"better understood."** Study participants also vastly preferred **person-first terms** to terms such as "addict" and "drug abuser."

What to use instead

**Person with substance
use disorder**

More addiction-related terminology



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Avoid the terms "drug abuse" and "substance abuse." Instead of "abuse," use "use" or "misuse": "Her drug misuse began when she started taking medication that wasn't prescribed to her." Default to person-first language instead of using terms such as "addict" or "alcoholic" unless a person prefers that term.

Drug classifications

Names of drugs

Overdose

Sobriety

Homeless

Why it matters

As is the case with "addict," some people experiencing homelessness might call themselves "homeless." But in that same UT Austin [study](#), participants **preferred person-first terms to stigmatizing terms** such as "the homeless."

What to use instead

Person experiencing homelessness

"Person who is **unhoused**" is another option. If you can, ask someone how they prefer to be identified.

Default to "unhoused" for a group



Kate Wiles

just now

should I use homeless or unhoused?

just now

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Use person-first language when writing about homelessness: "New York City reported an increase in people experiencing homelessness last year." Some people prefer the term "unhoused" because they feel they have a home even if they don't occupy a permanent residence. Always follow a person's preference and default to "unhoused" when describing a group: "The mayor introduced a plan to help the city's unhoused population." Avoid terms such as "the homeless" and "transients."

Ethical and inclusive language

Marijuana

Why it matters

Although “marijuana” is very commonly used, it’s a word with a **racist history** that traces back to efforts to demonize use of the drug in the United States.

What to use instead

Cannabis

“**Pot**” and “**weed**” work just fine too. “Marijuana” is so common that it's not going away entirely. But, with so many widely understood alternatives, we recommend choosing a synonym when possible.

"Cannabis" and "marijuana" are *technically* different

LD

Laura Davis

just now

should we use weed instead of marijuana?

just now

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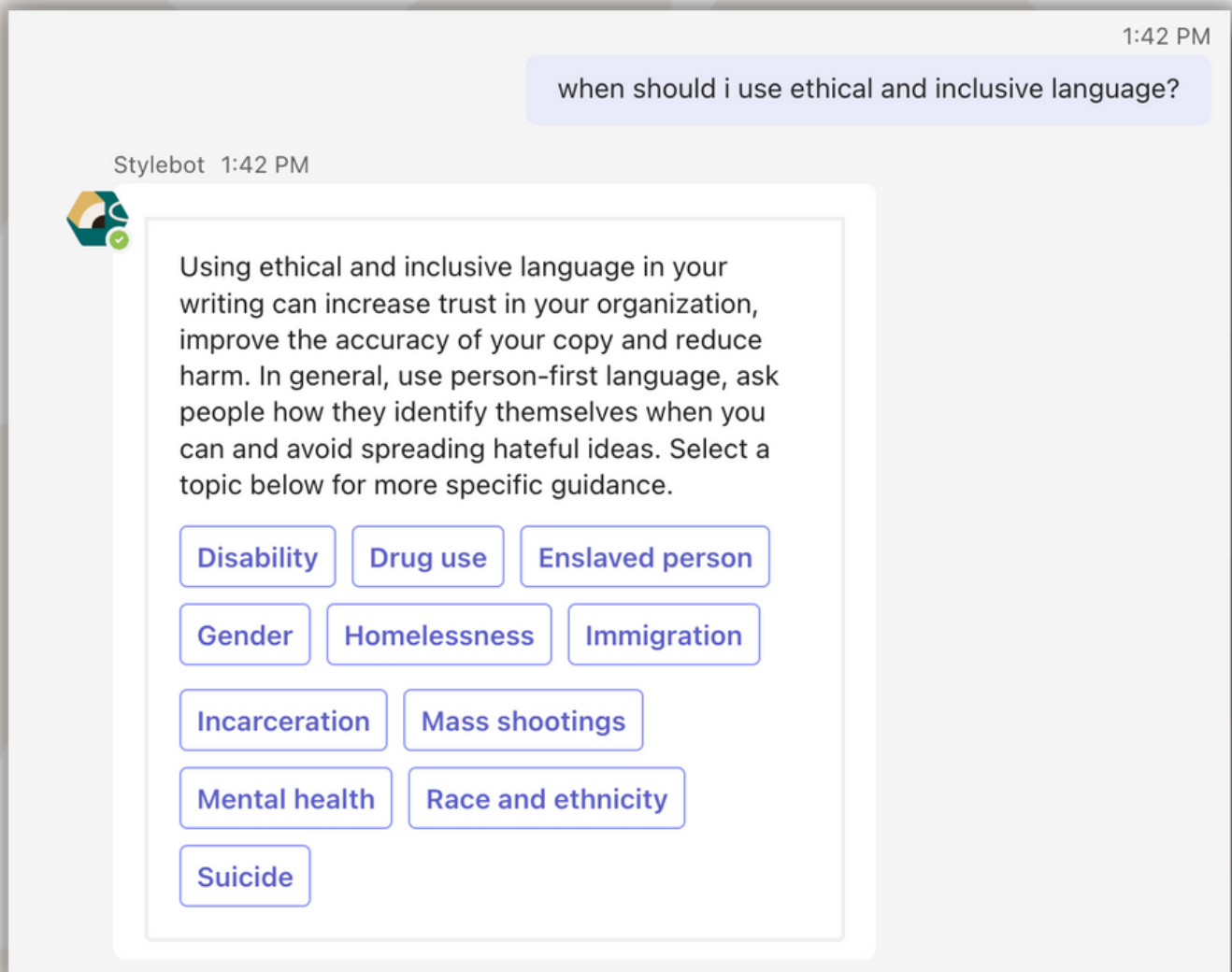


"Marijuana" and "cannabis" are often used interchangeably, but marijuana is the flower of the cannabis plant. Some people avoid use of "marijuana" because of its racist history, and you should consider an alternative such as "cannabis" or "weed" when appropriate. Don't capitalize any of the terms: "Her mom smoked pot well into her 70s."

"THC" is short for tetrahydrocannabinol, the active ingredient in the drug, and is acceptable on first reference. "CBD," short for cannabidiol, is another component of marijuana, though it does not produce a high. "CBD" is acceptable on first reference: "CVS has begun selling CBD oil."

You're on your way to making better writing choices


These four words are a good start, but there are more topics that require intentional language choices.



1:42 PM

when should i use ethical and inclusive language?

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 Using ethical and inclusive language in your writing can increase trust in your organization, improve the accuracy of your copy and reduce harm. In general, use person-first language, ask people how they identify themselves when you can and avoid spreading hateful ideas. Select a topic below for more specific guidance.

- Disability
- Drug use
- Enslaved person
- Gender
- Homelessness
- Immigration
- Incarceration
- Mass shootings
- Mental health
- Race and ethnicity
- Suicide

And language is always evolving

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