

Applying Inclusive Language

The following excerpts come from openly licensed texts. Please note this content may include ideas and descriptions that are offensive or upsetting. The revisions attempt to address the issues from the original texts using the principles of inclusive language.

Key

Use the following key to identify the principles of inclusive language.

- **Precision** (shaded)
- Specificity (wavy underline)
- **Humanity** (boxed)
- Accountability (solid underline)

Example 1

Original: On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an African American male, was shot and killed by the police in Ferguson, Missouri.

Revision: “On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an **18-year-old Black teenager** from Ferguson, Missouri, was killed after White police officer Darren Wilson shot him six times.”

- **Precision:** Changing “African American” to “Black” reflects the current preferred term when discussing matters of race. The addition of the police officer’s race provides an essential detail that’s part of this encounter. “Male” and “female” are best reserved for non-human animals; the simple addition of the masculine pronoun is sufficient to convey Michael Brown’s gender.
- Specificity: The number of shots fired helps the reader understand the degree of violence in this police encounter.
- **Humanity:** Adding “18-year-old teenager” helps the reader understand who Brown was.

- Accountability: Naming the police officer shows who is responsible for this action. This revision addresses a rhetorical device commonly known as the past exonerative tense, which is often used in media accounts, political writing, and police reports.

Example 2

Original: One long-standing explanation is that blacks and other people of color are **biologically inferior**: They are naturally less intelligent and have other innate flaws that keep them from getting a good education and otherwise doing what needs to be done to achieve the American Dream. As discussed earlier, this racist view is no longer common today. However, whites historically used this belief to justify slavery, lynching, the harsh treatment of Native Americans in the 1800s, and lesser forms of discrimination.

Revision: One long-standing explanation that has no scientific basis for why racial and ethnic inequalities exist is that **Black people** and other people of color are biologically inferior. This racist belief claims that some people are naturally less intelligent and capable than others. The concept of the biological inferiority of other races is a central belief of **White supremacy** and has been used historically to justify slavery, lynching, and systematic destruction of Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

- Accountability: Call out theories and beliefs that are racist or not supported scientifically.
- Specificity: Make sure to fill in all the details, even if you think the subject or context is clear.
- Humanity: Avoid using adjectives to describe people: “the poor,” “the homeless,” “the Blacks,” “the unvaccinated,” etc. This linguistic shortcut tends to reduce a group of people to a single characteristic.
- **Precision**: This revision has a more precise focus on White supremacy in order to avoid giving unintended legitimacy to the concept of biological inferiority.

Example 3

Original: In a multicultural society, one crucial question is: Are standardized tests biased against certain social classes or racial and ethnic groups? This question is much more complicated than it seems because bias, as we explored in Chapter 1, has a variety of meanings. An everyday meaning of bias often involves the fairness of using standardized test results to predict potential performance of disadvantaged students who have previously had few educational resources. For example, should Dwayne, a high school student who worked hard but had limited educational opportunities because of the poor schools in his neighborhood and few educational resources in his home, be denied graduation from high school because of his score on one test. It was not his fault that he did not have the educational resources and if given a chance with a change his environment (e.g. by going to college) his performance may blossom. In this view, test scores reflect societal inequalities and can punish students who are less privileged and are often erroneously interpreted as a reflection of a fixed inherited capacity.

Revision: Dwayne, a Black high school student, works hard to get good grades at his under-resourced school. Because Dwayne comes from a single-family household, there isn't always someone around to help with homework. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he attended class online but had to share the family's computer and unreliable wifi with his eighth-grade sister and he fell behind in his core subjects. Now he's about to take a skills test to determine whether he graduates. Should a single, high-stakes test decide Dwayne's future? What do standardized tests really measure?

Recent research has shown that test scores—and even the questions they ask—reflect socioeconomic inequalities (citation). These tests and the interpretation of their results disproportionately and negatively impact students who come from low-income communities and racial or ethnic minority groups (citation). In a multicultural society, we as criminology students must ask this: How do biased standardized tests, both in the schools and in our field, impact certain social classes or racial and ethnic groups? This question is much more complicated than it seems because bias, as we explored in Chapter 1, shows up in a variety of ways.

- **Humanity**: You can use a people-first approach at the paragraph level by leading with a personal example that humanizes your subject.
- **Precision**: The focus of this section is on racial bias in standardized testing, yet the original doesn't mention Dwayne's race at all. This is a relevant and essential detail.
- **Accountability**: Citing your sources and showing where ideas come from is one way of demonstrating accountability.
- **Specificity**: Whenever you use "we," be specific about who is included in that group. This level of specificity helps students see themselves as part of the in-group that can instigate change. Avoid the "[editorial we](#)" when referring to general groups of people.
- **Other notes**: Notice how the revision breaks up this paragraph into smaller chunks for readability and begins with the specific and moves to the general, which guides students from known and familiar experiences to new information.

Example 4

Original: The fear that there would be a slave revolt was the main reason the death penalty was imposed with the belief that it would be a deterrence for Blacks who weren't murdering whites but possibly destroying commodities or goods and also slaves who may have thought of running away or attack a white in any manner.

Revision: White enslavers feared that the people they held as slaves would revolt in order to gain freedom. Law enforcement used the threat of the death penalty to deter Black people from fighting back or destroying goods in protest.

- **Accountability**: Use active voice to make it clear who is doing what in each sentence. This is an important strategy for holding people accountable for their actions.
- **Humanity**: Especially when writing about slavery, take a people-first approach. See this [resource for guidance](#).

- Specificity: Why did enslaved people revolt? Specificity makes sure students see the entire picture.
- **Precision**: The original sentence is muddy and tries to do too much. Sometimes using shorter sentences and saying less can be the key to precision.