



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

WORDS THAT WELCOME

Inclusive Language Style Guide

YMCA OF THE USA | UPDATED JUNE 2024

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RELATED RESOURCES

In addition to this style guide, YMCA of the USA offers a suite of resources to assist you in thoughtful and intentional use of inclusive language:

- [Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion \(GDEI\) Glossary of Terms](#)
- [YMCA Equity Messaging Guide](#)
- [Brand Messaging Guide](#)
- [Y-USA House Style Guide](#)

QUESTIONS?

Email communications@ymca.net

INTRODUCTION

Why Words Matter

As a community-serving organization committed to advancing equity and inclusion for all, it is critical that the Y demonstrates in words and actions its commitment to becoming an anti-racist, multicultural organization. All Y staff and volunteers can help move the Y forward on this journey by being mindful of and consistent in the words we use to describe the diverse individuals and communities we serve.

Words matter, especially the words we use to describe one another. Words used carelessly can make people feel diminished, devalued and alienated, as well as perpetuate hurtful and harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about diverse individuals and communities. Conversely, **intentional, inclusive language can make people feel seen, validated, respected and welcomed.**

Using inclusive language also aligns with our organization's core values and brand personality, which guide us in communicating in ways that are welcoming, genuine, nurturing, hopeful and determined.

The Purpose of This Style Guide

A style guide documents style preferences related to particular words or terms to ensure consistency of usage across an organization. It is not a glossary or a set of key messages (both of which are available in other Y resources as noted on page 2). Rather, it is a complementary resource that offers recommended terms, terms to avoid, guidance when it comes to capitalization and other grammatical elements, as well as general inclusive language guidelines. For full definitions of terms, [please consult Y-USA's GDEI Glossary of Terms](#).

How Were These Style Decisions Made?

Relevant stakeholder groups across the Y Movement contributed to the creation of the style guide, including several of the Y's National Employee Resource Groups. Understanding that language evolves, Y-USA is committed to reviewing and updating this style guide periodically. The review process also offers opportunities to expand the style guide with additional categories. We invite any Y staff or volunteer to share suggestions for additional topics and terms to update or add to future versions of this style guide by emailing communications@ymca.net.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Self-Identification

While this document establishes specific style and wording choices for content created by Y-USA (which are also recommended for YMCAs to adopt), these choices may not apply to every individual. It is always important to respect how people choose to self-identify and defer to their preferences, interacting with them as the unique individuals they are. This includes the names they wish to be called, the pronouns they use to identify themselves, and the nouns and adjectives they use to describe their dimensions of diversity.

Guidelines, Not Rules

While words do matter, their purpose is to facilitate — not discourage — honest dialogue around difficult topics. It's important to remember that language evolves quickly, and preference can vary widely by region, age, and culture and based on individuals' life experiences. We encourage Y leaders to use the recommendations included here with grace and as tools to support intentional, empathetic communication rather than fixed rules to be employed regardless of context.

Flexibility for Field-Specific Terminology and Audiences

Certain situations and audiences may require deviations from the styles presented here (e.g., the need to align with U.S. Census Bureau classifications for race and ethnicity). Such situations still represent an opportunity to take steps — for example, initiating conversations with partners or adding context and framing to communications — to demonstrate the Y's commitment to equity and inclusion and remain true to the foundational principles of this style guide.

Offensive Terminology

Some terms are universally understood to be offensive; this style guide does not list such terms. However, we have noted certain terms to avoid, which, while considered offensive to many, may not be understood as offensive by all.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

When communicating about people and communities, keep these guidelines in mind:

- **Use person-first language** to elevate the individual and emphasize that there is more to each person than their descriptors. Mention characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race/ethnicity or ability only when relevant.

***Example:** a person with diabetes instead of a diabetic*

- **Use language** that empowers individuals and communities by focusing on their positive attributes and strengths and avoids portraying them as passive and/or powerless.

***Example:** instead of saying *the YMCA served at-risk youth*, try *the YMCA designed a program to engage youth who could benefit from literacy training**

- **Be specific.** When describing an individual or community, use specific language when possible and relevant. This can help us avoid applying terminology or colloquial phrases inaccurately or in ways that are confusing and not helpful to the reader and provide specificity on the issue to be addressed. .

***Example:** a person with bipolar disorder instead of a person with mental illness*

- **Avoid stereotypes and labeling.** Stereotypes are widely held but oversimplified opinions or prejudiced attitudes about a particular group of people. They cannot accurately or effectively describe a unique individual or group and instead can imply unfair judgment or connotation. When possible, provide specific data to support your statements and add clarity.

***Example:** instead of saying *older generations struggle to use technology*, try *70 percent of members over the age of 70 said they struggle with technology**

ABILITY

General Guidelines

- Most importantly, follow an individual's or a community's preference for self-identification. Once someone has self-identified, if you are still unsure what term(s) to use, ask and learn their preference.
- Use person-first language (e.g., a person who is deaf), but be mindful that some individuals and communities prefer identity-first language (e.g., a deaf person). For example, identity-first language is commonly preferred in the Deaf community and increasingly so in the autistic community.
- Consider carefully when deciding whether to reference an individual's disability. Often, it is an irrelevant factor, and drawing unnecessary attention to it can be interpreted as bigotry or discrimination. In addition, ensure any reference to an individual's disability is used only with their knowledge and approval. This information is theirs to define and share when and how they prefer.
- Focus on what a person does rather than limitations or negative labels (e.g., a person who uses a wheelchair, not a person confined to a wheelchair, and a person with a traumatic brain injury, not brain-damaged).
- Avoid using *defect* or *defective* when describing a disability, which are considered derogatory. Instead, state the nature of the disability or injury and use the general term condition when needed.
- See the Mental Health section of this guide for information about mental health, mental illness and substance use disorder.

Common Ability Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
people with disabilities	people with diverse abilities serving a diversity of abilities	handicap; handicapped; handicapable the disabled the differently abled abnormal people with special needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This recommendation represents a shift in Y-USA style from recent years and is grounded in a recognition that <i>diverse ability</i> is not a widely used term and that many individuals have reclaimed the term <i>disability</i>. Even so, it's important to note that <i>disability</i> is not always the preferred term of individuals and communities. Some may still view it as having a negative connotation and prefer <i>diverse ability</i>.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Abnormal</i> can be found in medical or scientific contexts but should not be used to describe an individual or community. <i>The disabled</i> should be avoided as a descriptive category for the disability community. However, it's important to note that more individuals with disabilities are reclaiming the term <i>disabled</i> as a way to define their identity and discourage unpreferred alternatives. The term <i>special needs</i> is still commonly used in some geographic regions, often by guardians of youth with disabilities. It is not commonly used when describing adults.
people without disabilities	neurotypical	normal healthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using <i>normal</i> to describe people without disabilities implies that people with disabilities are <i>abnormal</i>.
disability community		disabled community	
a person with [specific condition or diagnosis] a person with mental illness	a person diagnosed with [specific condition or diagnosis] a person with a psychiatric disability	mentally ill crazy insane psycho psychotic emotionally disturbed demented nuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer to a person's specific diagnosis when possible. For example, <i>a person with bipolar disorder</i> is preferable to <i>a person with mental illness</i>. Some individuals may dislike use of the term <i>mental illness</i> because of the stigma often associated with a mental health diagnosis. Avoid using terms like psychotic, bipolar, multiple personality disorder, schizophrenic, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) colloquially or to describe anything other than a diagnosed medical condition.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
a person with a developmental disability a person with an intellectual/ cognitive disability	a person diagnosed with a developmental disability a person diagnosed with an intellectual/ cognitive disability	mentally retarded mentally challenged retarded slow simple high functioning low functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While the terms <i>developmental disability</i>, <i>cognitive disability</i> and <i>intellectual disability</i> are acceptable, it is best to be specific about the disability when possible.
a person with a learning disability a student who receives special education services	diverse learners	learning disabled a special ed student a special education student	
a person who has a congenital disability	a person who has had a disability since birth a person who was born with a disability	a person with a birth defect	
a person with Down syndrome	a person who is living with Down syndrome	Downs person Down's syndrome or Down's Syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The terms <i>developmental disability</i>, <i>cognitive disability</i> and <i>intellectual disability</i> are acceptable when used in a person-first context to describe someone with Down syndrome, such as <i>a person with a developmental disability</i>.
a person who has autism	a person who has been diagnosed with autism a person on the autism spectrum an autistic person		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some individuals and communities use identity-first language and prefer to be described as <i>an autistic person</i> rather than <i>a person who has autism</i>.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
a person with a physical disability a person with quadriplegia a person with paraplegia a person with a mobility impairment	a person who walks with crutches a person who uses a walker a person who uses a wheelchair	a quadriplegic a paraplegic physically challenged cripple confined to a wheelchair disfigured lame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid terms that describe an individual's limitations or carry a condescending or negative connotation.
a person who is unable to speak a person who uses a communication device		mute nonverbal	
a person who is blind a person who is visually impaired	a blind person a person with limited vision a person with low vision		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some individuals and communities use identity-first language and prefer to be described as <i>a blind person</i> rather than <i>a person who is blind</i>.
a person who is deaf/partially deaf a person who is hard of hearing the Deaf community	a deaf person		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some individuals and communities use identity-first language and prefer to be described as <i>a deaf person</i> rather than as <i>a person who is deaf</i>. Generally, when referring to an individual's sense of hearing, lowercase <i>deaf</i>. However, be prepared to reflect an individual's preference if they capitalize <i>Deaf</i> when referring to themselves.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
a person with a brain injury a person with a traumatic brain injury	a person who has sustained a brain injury	brain-damaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When referring to the culture or community of individuals who are deaf or partially deaf, capitalize <i>Deaf</i> (e.g., <i>the Deaf community</i>).
a person with dwarfism	a dwarf a little person a person of short stature	a midget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When using these terms, it is especially important to reflect an individual's or a community's self-identification preference as there is no universally preferred terminology. While some individuals identify as a <i>little person</i> and find the term <i>dwarf</i> offensive, others take the opposite view of these terms.
a person with [chronic disease] (e.g., a person with diabetes)		a diabetic	

MENTAL HEALTH

General Guidelines

- Distinguish between mental health and mental illness. Do not use “mental illness” when referring to “mental health” and vice-versa.
 - Mental health is how we think, feel and act. Everyone has mental health in the same way everyone has physical health.
 - Mental illness specifically refers to diagnosable mental disorders defined by the American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Such disorders are characterized by changes in emotion, thinking or behavior and are associated with significant distress or impairment of daily functioning.
- Normalize conversations about mental health—especially the fact that we all have mental health—and using respectful language about mental health conditions. You should also avoid using stigmatizing language, like “crazy” or “nuts.”
- Everyone has a role in supporting mental health. This can be done by talking about mental health as something all people have, practicing self-care, understanding trauma is common, using respectful language and connecting people to formal mental health supports as needed.
- Use person-first language. For example, use “person with schizophrenia” instead of “a schizophrenic.”
- Avoid using psychotic, bipolar, narcissistic, multiple personality disorder, schizophrenic, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) colloquially or to describe anything other than a diagnosed medical condition. For example, don’t call someone who is tidy “OCD.” Don’t say someone is “acting ADHD” when they forget something.

Common Mental Health Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
died by suicide		committed suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Saying someone ‘committed’ suicide implies that the individual is to blame for a criminal act.
mental health		Using “mental health” and “mental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental health is how we think, feel and act. We all have mental health.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
		illness” interchangeably	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health is a part of an individual’s overall health. Mental health includes both mental wellness and mental illness. Be careful when using each of these terms to say specifically what you mean.
a person with [specific condition or diagnosis] a person with mental illness	a person diagnosed with [specific condition or diagnosis] a person with a psychiatric disability	mentally ill crazy insane psycho psychotic emotionally disturbed demented nuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer to a person’s specific diagnosis when possible. For example, <i>a person with bipolar disorder</i> is preferable to <i>a person with mental illness</i>. Some individuals may dislike use of the term <i>mental illness</i> because of the stigma often associated with a mental health diagnosis. Avoid using terms like psychotic, bipolar, multiple personality disorder, schizophrenic, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) colloquially or to describe anything other than a diagnosed medical condition.
a person with a substance use disorder a person with an alcohol use disorder a person in recovery a person recovering from alcoholism	a person struggling with addiction/ alcohol addiction a person who uses/misuses drugs	an addict a junkie/druggie an alcoholic a person with a drug problem/ alcohol problem a drug abuser/ substance abuser a former/reformed addict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addiction is a neurobiological disease, so it is best to use the word only to refer to a disease or medical disorder. Avoid using the term colloquially or in a manner that implies it is a condition one can easily change (e.g., a drug <i>problem</i>). Use the word <i>misuse</i> in place of <i>abuse</i> when describing harmful drug usage. Substance use disorders are included in this section (instead of the “ability” section) due to their impact on behavior and mental health.
Resilience			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is our ability to thrive, adapt, and cope despite tough and stressful times. Communities that are marginalized and oppressed may push back on terms such as resilience – we need to focus on

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
			<p>what is causing the stress and not just focus on building resilience to the stress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resilience is built through intentional activities that promote connection to self, others and coping skills. It can be learned and developed.
Mindfulness		Using “mindfulness” and “meditation” interchangeably	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mindfulness is frequently equated with meditation, however, they are not the same. Meditation is an intentional practice of focusing to increase calmness, concentration, awareness, and emotional balance. It is commonly performed as part of a formal and seated practice. Mindfulness is the act of paying attention and remaining present, and can be practiced anytime, anywhere, and with anyone. The list of mindfulness activities is ever expanding but common practices include walking meditation, body scans, and mindful eating.
trauma	racial trauma generational trauma stress		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA Definition). According to the DSM-IV, trauma can occur any time severe stress overwhelms someone’s ability to cope, not just during catastrophic incidents like war or sexual assault. Racism and systemic racism are traumatic experiences people of color and other marginalized populations deal with on an on-going basis. Racial trauma can be caused by overt actions of bigotry and hate, as well as subtle experiences like higher rates of

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
trauma-informed care	trauma-informed trauma-informed approach	trauma-specific	<p>incarcerations or lower rates of home loan approvals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma-informed care is an organizational structure and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing and responding to the effects trauma. The approach emphasizes physical, psychological and emotional safety for both those served in the community and the providers and helps survivors rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. • Not all efforts that support mental health qualify as trauma-informed care. Be specific when using the term “trauma-informed.” • A trauma-informed approach is distinct from trauma-specific treatment or services. Trauma-informed care takes into account knowledge about trauma into all aspects of service delivery, however, it is not specifically designed to treat symptoms or syndromes related to trauma. • Trauma-specific treatment, on the other hand, directly addresses the impact of trauma on an individual’s life and facilitates trauma recovery. These are best practice models that are designed to treat the actual consequences of trauma.

FAITH, BELIEFS AND RELIGIONS

Below are the basic identification terms related to the six most-practiced faiths, beliefs and religions in the United States. For additional context and terminology related to these religions, please reference the resource, [Strengthening Inclusion: Engaging Communities of Diverse Faiths and Beliefs in Your YMCA](#).

General Guidelines

- Consider carefully when deciding whether to reference an individual's faith, belief or religious affiliation. Often, it is an irrelevant factor, and drawing unnecessary attention to it can be interpreted as bigotry or discrimination. In addition, ensure any reference to an individual's faith, belief or religion is used only with their knowledge and approval. This information is theirs to define and share when and how they prefer.
- Be mindful that within a religion, there can be different denominations with diversity of beliefs and cultures. Avoid making broad generalizations about individuals or communities of a particular religion.
- Don't make assumptions about a person's religion based on their country of origin.
- Follow an individual's or a community's preference, and be specific when possible and relevant.
- As an organization dedicated to diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism, it is important for Y staff to consider religious holidays and observances when planning communications and events. Consult the Y's [Religious Holidays and Observances](#) calendar to learn more.

Common Faith, Belief and Religion Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
Buddhism Buddhist			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A person who practices Buddhism is <i>Buddhist</i>.
Christianity Christian			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A person who practices Christianity is <i>Christian</i>.
Hinduism Hindu			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A person who practices Hinduism is <i>Hindu</i>.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
Islam Muslim			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A person who practices Islam is <i>Muslim</i>.
Judaism Jewish			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A person who practices Judaism is <i>Jewish</i>. Some individuals who do not practice Judaism may still identify as Jewish based on their ancestry, ethnicity or cultural background.
religiously unaffiliated	atheist agnostic		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to the Pew Research Center, the religiously unaffiliated includes atheists (do not believe in God), agnostics (not sure if there is a God), and those who respond with, “nothing in particular” when asked to state their religion. Don’t assume that someone who is not religious is an atheist.

GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Do not conflate or draw connections between gender identity and sexual orientation. Gender is an individual's own, internal personal sense of being a man, woman, or someone who identifies as gender nonbinary. Sexual orientation describes a person's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. To further reinforce this distinction, the identity terms that follow are separated accordingly.

General Guidelines

- Avoid references to *both*, *either* or *opposite* sexes or genders as a way to refer to all people. Not all people fall under one of two categories for sex or gender.
- When asking people to identify their sex or gender (e.g., on a form or survey), ensure individuals have the space to enter their own preferred term.
- Avoid heteronormative language, which is defined as language that implies that everyone is heterosexual or that heterosexuality is superior to other sexual orientations (e.g., avoid the use of terms like *normal* to refer to male-female relationships and *special* to refer to male-male or female-female relationships; avoid terms like *mom and dad* if you are unaware of the sexual orientation of a child's caregiver.).
- Consider carefully when deciding whether to reference an individual's gender identity, sexual orientation, or intersex status. Often, it is an irrelevant factor, and drawing unnecessary attention to it can be interpreted as bigotry or discrimination. In addition, ensure any reference to an individual's gender identity, sexual orientation or intersex status is used only with their knowledge and approval. This information is theirs to define and share when and how they prefer.
- Avoid attributing gender to an individual without understanding first how they identify. How a person presents does not necessarily reflect how they identify. In addition, avoid gender pronouns. When referring to unspecified persons, make your subject plural or otherwise reword to avoid gender whenever possible.

Singular (avoid): If a member has questions, ask him or her to call me.

Preferred: If members have questions, ask them to call me.

In limited cases, when rewording is impossible or awkward, it is acceptable to use they/them/their as a singular or gender-neutral pronoun (e.g., *The person left their credit card at the membership desk.*).

- When asking individuals to share their pronouns, avoid the phrase "preferred pronouns" as the use of "preferred" can imply the pronouns used do not align with the individual's gender identity. Simply ask for their pronouns.
- When communicating to or about a transgender or gender nonconforming individual, never misgender them (refer to them as any gender other than what they identify as) or "deadname" them (refer to them by their birth name or legal name if they have affirmed a new name for themselves that better aligns with their identity). Doing so can cause harm or trauma.

- Avoid gender-specific language that can exclude people or promote stereotypes (e.g., *folks* or *y'all* instead of *guys*; *humanity* instead of *mankind*; *first-year student* instead of *freshman*; *chairperson* or *chair* instead of *chairman*).

Common Gender Identity Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
transgender (adj.)	trans man, trans woman, trans community (adj.)	transgendered (adj.) transsexual (n. or adj.) a transgender (n.) tranny (n.) transvestite (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify individuals as transgender only if pertinent and only with their knowledge and approval. • In referencing this population, seek to include language that underscores a commitment to protecting the privacy of individuals who identify in this way. • Because its meaning is not precise or widely understood, use the term <i>trans</i> with caution. • When referring to transgender individuals, use the name by which they live publicly.
nonbinary (adj.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the lack of understanding that can sometimes accompany this term, use it only if someone specifically self-identifies that way and asks for this term to be used. • <i>Nonbinary</i> and <i>genderqueer</i> are not synonymous with one another or with <i>transgender</i>. See the GDEI Glossary for a full definition of these terms.
genderqueer (adj.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the lack of understanding that can sometimes accompany this term, use it only if someone specifically self-identifies that way and asks for this term to be used. • <i>Nonbinary</i> and <i>genderqueer</i> are not synonymous with one another or with <i>transgender</i>. See the GDEI Glossary for a full definition of these terms.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
gender-nonconforming (adj.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given the lack of understanding that can sometimes accompany this term, use it only if someone specifically self-identifies that way and asks for this term to be used. See the GDEI Glossary for a full definition of this term. Note the placement of the hyphen in <i>gender-nonconforming</i>.
intersex (adj.)		hermaphrodite (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify individuals as intersex only if pertinent and only with their knowledge and approval.
transition, transitioning (v.)	gender transition (v.)	sex change (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals who are transitioning may use medical procedures to match their sex to their gender, but not necessarily.
cisgender (adj.)	non-transgender (adj.)	normal (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Cisgender</i> is not synonymous with <i>heterosexual</i>, which refers to sexual orientation.

Common Sexual Orientation Identity Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
asexual (adj.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given the lack of understanding that can sometimes accompany this term, use it only if someone specifically self-identifies that way and asks for this term to be used.
bisexual, bi (adj.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given the lack of understanding that can sometimes accompany this term, use it only if someone specifically self-identifies that way and asks for this term to be used. Do not hyphenate <i>bisexual</i>.
pansexual (adj.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given the lack of understanding that can sometimes accompany this term, use it only if someone specifically self-identifies that way and asks for this term to be used.
gay (adj.) lesbian(s) (n. or adj.) questioning (adj.)	queer (adj.)	gay(s) (n.) homosexual (n. or adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Lesbian</i> is the more common term for women who are attracted to the same sex. Use the term <i>questioning</i> only when individuals first use the term to describe themselves. The use of <i>gay</i> as a noun (<i>a gay, the gays</i>) is sometimes considered offensive. Instead, use the term as an adjective (e.g., <i>gay man, gay woman, gay people</i>). Use the term <i>queer</i> with caution. While it has been reclaimed by some, it is not a universally accepted term even in the LGBTQ+ community. The term <i>homosexual</i> can be seen as evoking negative stereotypes and outdated clinical understandings of homosexuality as a psychiatric condition. In general, it should be avoided unless being used to provide historical context.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
heterosexual (adj.)	straight (adj.)	normal (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid the use of <i>straight</i> in a way that implies those who identify this way are part of an in-group or that anyone who does not identify this way is somehow outside the norm.
LGBTQ+ (adj.)	LGBT+ (adj.) LGBTQIA+ (adj.)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These terms are best used as umbrella terms. Avoid using them, for example, to refer to a group that is limited to bisexuals. The plus used at the end of these terms is inclusive of all the different ways people think of their sexual identity. If using LGBTQIA+, explain the other letters. <i>I</i> generally stands for intersex. <i>A</i> generally stands for asexual (a person who does not experience sexual attraction).
LGBTQ+ community	LGBT+ community, LGBTQIA+ community	gay community gay lifestyle, alternative lifestyle	
sexual orientation (n.)		sexual preference (n.) same-sex attractions (n.) sexual identity (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid <i>sexual preference</i>, which implies that sexuality is a matter of choice.
marriage	marriage for all, marriage equality	gay marriage same-sex marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the term <i>same-sex marriage</i> only when necessary to distinguish it from marriage between male-female heterosexual couples.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

General Guidelines

- Consider carefully when deciding whether to identify individuals and communities by race. Often, it is an irrelevant factor and drawing unnecessary attention to someone's race or ethnicity can be interpreted as bigotry or discrimination.
- Follow an individual's or a community's preference, if known, and be specific when possible and relevant. Be careful not to make assumptions about an individual's race or ethnicity based on their appearance.
- When designating dual heritage (e.g., *Mexican American*), do not use a hyphen, regardless of how the term is used.
- Avoid culturally offensive or culturally appropriative phrases, idioms or colloquialisms that refer to Indigenous people or derive from Indigenous culture, including: referring to someone as *Chief*; referring to a meeting as a *powwow*; referring to one's status as a place (high or low) on *the totem pole*; using the phrase *off the reservation* to describe aberrant thinking or behavior; referring to any person as one's *spirit animal*; or using *Indian* as any sort of descriptor (e.g. *Indian summer*; *Indian giver*; sitting *Indian style*).

Common Race and Ethnicity Identity Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
people of color communities of color	BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) Black and Brown	minorities (n.) minority (n., adj.) vulnerable, at-risk (adj.) nonwhite (adj.) "all the colors of the rainbow" terms urban, inner-city (adj.) diverse (adj.) exotic (adj.) foreign (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid describing people and communities as <i>minorities</i>, <i>vulnerable</i> or <i>at-risk</i> as this implies a deficit or deficiency. When necessary to compare a nondominant racial group with a dominant racial group to identify an inequity, the terms <i>racial minority</i>, <i>ethnic minority</i>, <i>marginalized community</i> or <i>underrepresented group</i> may be more appropriate (e.g., <i>According to CBS News, Black people are underrepresented in senior leadership roles at large companies, representing only 3.2 percent of C-suite positions.</i>). Similarly, <i>nonwhite</i> should be avoided, as it implies that <i>white</i> is the norm. • Use the term <i>BIPOC</i> with caution. While it appears more frequently as a more expansive alternative to <i>people of color</i>, it is still not widely understood by the public and could further confuse the individuals

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		ethnic (adj.)	<p>being referred to because many Black and Indigenous individuals identify as people of color. Remember to spell out the term at first mention in keeping with preferred Y-USA style.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The phrase <i>Black and Brown</i> is used in many communities to convey a strong sense of shared experience and solidarity between Black and Latinx communities. Avoid describing diversity and inclusion in colorblind or “all the colors of the rainbow” terms, e.g., “we don’t care if you’re white, black, brown, red, yellow or purple.” These terms rely on the concept that race-based differences do not matter and ignore the realities of systemic racism. They also minimize the value of differences across all individuals and imply the desire to achieve a monocultural experience for all involved. Terms like <i>urban</i> and <i>inner-city</i> can operate as code words that carry a stigma or perpetuate stereotypes. Avoid using the term <i>diverse</i> to describe people of color who identify as the same race or ethnicity. Instead, use it to describe a group of individuals of different races and ethnicities.
Black (adj.)	African American (n., adj.) African diaspora (n.) [Specific country/region of origin] American person of color (n.)	Black (n.) Black/African American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not use <i>Black</i> as a singular noun. For plural usage, use phrasing such as <i>Black people</i> or <i>Black communities</i>. (Referring to people as <i>Blacks</i> can be seen as pejorative.) Note that we capitalize <i>Black</i> when used in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense to convey an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black. In a U.S. context, <i>African American</i> is often an appropriate option; however, even in the U.S., the

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	Afro-Latino (n.)		<p>terms <i>Black</i> and <i>African American</i> are not always interchangeable. Americans of Caribbean heritage, for example, generally refer to themselves as <i>Caribbean American</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the outdated terms <i>Afro-American</i>, <i>Negro</i> or <i>colored</i> only in names of organizations or quoted in a clearly historical context. The term <i>Afro-Latino</i> is often used to describe a Black person of Latin American origin and African ancestry.
white (adj.)	[Specific country/region of origin] American	Caucasian (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not use <i>white</i> as a singular noun. For plurals, use phrasing such as <i>white people</i> or <i>white communities</i>. Many have differing views on whether to capitalize <i>white</i>, and it is an evolving conversation. Y-USA recommends lowercasing the term because generally those who identify as <i>white</i> do not share a history or culture (as would, for example, those who identify as Irish or Italian American). However, we recognize each community is unique and some Ys may capitalize <i>white</i> to enable constructive dialogue and progress to occur. The use of the term <i>Caucasian</i> as an alternative to <i>white</i> or <i>European</i> is discouraged because it originated as a way of classifying <i>white</i> people as a race superior to other races.
Asian Pacific Islander (n.) Asian (n.) Pacific Islander (n.)	Regional specifications, e.g., <i>Southeast Asian</i> [Specific country/region of origin] American	Oriental (n.) yellow (adj.) Brown (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Oriental</i> is outdated and considered a pejorative term when used to describe people. Avoid misidentifying Asian Pacific Islander individuals and communities as belonging to an arbitrary country of origin (e.g., indiscriminately referring to all API individuals as “Chinese”).

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	person of color (n.) Asian American (n.) AAPINH (Asian American/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid the term <i>Brown</i> on its own as it is a broad and imprecise term with respect to race/ethnicity. As noted above, the term <i>Black and Brown</i> may be appropriate to use in certain contexts.
Hispanic/Latino (n.) Hispanic (n., adj.) Latino/a (n.)	[Specific country/region of origin] American Latinx (n.) person of color (n.) Afro-Latino (n.)	Spanish Brown (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Hispanic</i> refers to a person who is from, or whose ancestors were from, a Spanish-speaking land or culture. <i>Latino</i> refers to a person who is from, or whose ancestors were from, a Latin-American land or culture, including non-Spanish-speaking places (e.g., Brazil). <i>Latina</i> is the feminine form. <i>Latinx</i> is a gender-neutral form that has gained popularity with younger, American Hispanics/Latinos but not widely used in the Hispanic/Latino community as a whole. Note that <i>Spanish</i> is used to describe the people of the country of Spain and should not be used to describe all Latinos. However, <i>Spanish speakers</i> or <i>Spanish-speaking communities</i> can be appropriate terms to use in certain contexts (e.g., when describing Y programs that serve individuals who speak Spanish). Avoid the term <i>Brown</i> on its own as it is a broad and imprecise term with respect to race/ethnicity. As noted above, the term <i>Black and Brown</i> may be appropriate to use in certain contexts. The term <i>Afro-Latino</i> is often used to describe a Black person of Latin American origin and African ancestry.

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Indigenous (adj.)	Native American (n.) Native Peoples (n.) American Indian (n.) Alaska Native (n.) Native Hawaiian (n.) Specific group, tribe or nation, e.g., <i>the Cherokee Nation</i> person of color (n.)	Indian (n.) Eskimo (n.) Aborigine (n.) native (n.) red (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalize <i>Indigenous</i> when referring to the original inhabitants of a place. Note that <i>Indian</i> is used to describe the people of the South Asian nation of India and should not be used to describe Indigenous people. <i>Alaska Native</i> is the preferred term to describe Indigenous people from Alaska (not <i>Eskimo</i>). When referring to a specific Indigenous group, tribe or nation, defer to how they self-style.
multiracial (adj.) biracial (adj.)	person of color (n.)	mixed race (adj.) half breed (n.) mulatto (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While <i>mulatto</i> is seen widely as an offensive term, some groups may self-identify with the term.
multicultural (adj.) bicultural (adj.)		melting pot (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The expression <i>melting pot</i>, traditionally used to describe diverse communities, should be avoided, as it implies that individuals of diverse backgrounds must assimilate into a dominant monoculture.

NATIONALITY, CITIZENSHIP, AND IMMIGRATION STATUS

Important Context

- People who permanently resettle to the U.S. from another country are considered *immigrants* regardless of their citizenship or residency. *First-generation immigrants* are the first foreign-born family members to gain citizenship or permanent residency in the U.S. The term *second-generation immigrants* generally refers to the second generation of a family to inhabit, but the first natively-born in, the U.S. (despite the fact that, strictly speaking, they are not immigrants.)
- There are many terms related to a person's citizenship and immigration status that have specific, legal meanings in the U.S. (e.g. *asylee*, *DACA*, *green card*, *migrant*, *permanent resident alien*, and *refugee*, to name a few). Refer to the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Glossary](#) for details.
- From a U.S. legal standpoint, people who are recognized as Indigenous (American Indian or Alaska Native) possess official membership or citizenship in a federally recognized tribe. (It is important to note that such status does not remove or nullify a person's U.S. or state of residence citizenship.) Tribes have varying eligibility criteria for membership/citizenship. A person can be ethnically Indigenous without possessing official membership or citizenship in a tribe.

General Guidelines

- Unless the subject has been broached, don't ask someone the question "where are you from?" While it may seem harmless, it can be perceived as a microaggression by questioning whether someone belongs, or reducing their identity to a particular nationality or culture.
- Never use the term *illegal* to describe a person. *Illegal* may be used to describe an action, but take care not to use it in a way that could promote stereotypes or othering.
- Always elevate and affirm peoples' humanity over their legal status.
- Do not specify a person's citizenship or immigration status unless it is relevant.
- Never "out" or expose an undocumented individual as doing so may put them and/or their family at risk of deportation or other harm.
- Avoid culturally offensive or culturally appropriative phrases, idioms or colloquialisms that refer to Indigenous people or derive from Indigenous culture, including: referring to someone as *Chief*; referring to a meeting as a *powwow*; referring to one's status as a place (high or low) on *the totem pole*; using the phrase *off the reservation* to describe aberrant thinking or behavior; referring to any person as one's *spirit animal*; or using *Indian* as any sort of descriptor (e.g. *Indian summer*; *Indian giver*; sitting *Indian style*). This also includes avoiding outdated and inappropriate YMCA program nomenclature (e.g. *Indian Guides*; *Indian Princesses*).

Common Nationality, Citizenship and Immigration Status Terms Used in the U.S.

Recommended	Also Acceptable	Avoid	Context and Considerations
community member (n.) neighbor (n.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be careful of making the assumption that everyone in your community is a U.S. citizen. When referring generally to the people in our communities, remember that communities include people with a wide range of immigration and citizenship statuses.
newcomer (n.)	newcomer immigrant (n.) immigrant (n.)	foreigner (n.) foreign (adj.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In common parlance, <i>newcomer</i> can refer to any individual who is relatively new to the U.S., including first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants, and people belonging to successive generations who retain close familial, social and cultural ties to an immigrant community. When referring to individuals or groups of people whose specific citizenship and immigration status is varied or unknown, <i>newcomer</i> is the preferred umbrella term to use.
immigrant (n.) migrant (n.)	internally displaced person (n.) lawful permanent resident (n.) undocumented immigrant (n.) undocumented worker (n.) unauthorized immigrant (n.) unauthorized worker (n.)	illegal immigrant (n.) illegal alien (n.) illegal (n.) alien (n.) expat (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the Y, we are for all – and that includes all immigrants and migrants, regardless of their citizenship status. Consider whether it is relevant to mention an individual or group’s documentation or authorization to live or work in the U.S. If the context warrants such specification, use the term <i>undocumented</i>, <i>unauthorized</i>, or <i>seeking status</i> to describe a person’s immigration status, but never “out” or expose a person’s status, as doing so could put them and/or their family at risk of deportation or other harm. Never describe any person as <i>illegal</i> or as an <i>alien</i> as these are dehumanizing terms. The term <i>expat</i> (short for <i>expatriate</i>) generally refers to a person living in a country where they do

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	immigrant seeking status (n.)		not hold citizenship to live and/or work on a temporary basis. This definition is essentially the same as that of the term <i>migrant</i> ; however, <i>expat</i> has a connotation of racial and class hierarchy as a term typically associated with white people and/or people of higher socioeconomic status.
child (n.)	citizen child of undocumented immigrants (n.)	anchor baby (n.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Anchor baby</i> is a pejorative term used to refer to a child born to a non-citizen mother in a country (such as the U.S.) that has birthright citizenship laws. • As a youth development organization, the Y cares for the wellbeing of all children, regardless of their – or their parents’ – citizenship or immigration status.
person with DACA (n.)	Dreamer (n.)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is a program of the Department of Homeland Security that enables individuals who came to the U.S. as children – and who meet certain specific guidelines – to request deferral of any deportation proceedings against them for a period of two years, subject to renewal. As of this writing, DACA renewal requests are being processed, but new DACA applications have been suspended. • The DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) is a legislative proposal to grant temporary conditional residency and the right to work to undocumented minors, with a pathway to permanent residency. While the bill has not become law as of this writing, the term <i>Dreamer</i> has often been used to describe immigrants who would stand to benefit from either the DREAM Act or DACA.
refugee (n.) asylum seeker (n.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A <i>refugee</i> is a person who – <u>while in another country</u> where they fear persecution – requests to enter the U.S. for protection and is subsequently resettled there through the U.S. resettlement program.

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asylee (n.)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An <i>asylum seeker</i> is a person who requests protection <u>upon or after arrival</u> in the U.S. because they fear persecution in their home country. If they are granted asylum, they are legally referred to as an <i>asylee</i>.
[Country name] American (n. or adj.), e.g. “Pakistani American”	A person from [Country name], e.g. “A person from Pakistan”		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When referring to the national origin of a U.S. citizen, do not include a hyphen between the descriptor and “American.” The use of the hyphen is rooted in the history of the ‘hyphenated American’—an epithet used during the late 19th century to the early 20th century to ridicule Americans of foreign birth or origin.
nation	tribe		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use “nation” instead of “tribe” unless an Indigenous community uses the word “tribe” to describe themselves and/or in their formal name. When writing about an Indigenous nation/tribe, use the name and spelling they use for themselves. If a nation is commonly known by another name, you can provide that name in parentheses on first reference.

RESOURCES CONSULTED

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