

Inclusive language

Overview

There are several common terms used in business and technology which reflect cultural bias, especially regarding race. In fact, some of these terms can't be understood without also comprehending the implied bias they reference. When we use these terms, it can cause some of our colleagues and customers to feel unwelcome or disrespected. These and other microaggressions add up over time to cause real hurt to real people.

Our company values diversity and inclusion. We recognize that our words have real impacts, so we'll try our best to avoid using problematic terms. This isn't because we're trying to appear "woke" or follow a trend—we genuinely want to treat people better. It's simply the right thing to do.

This document lists several problematic terms and suggested alternatives. Some may seem "nitpicky", and you may even disagree that some are problematic. But instead of defending the terms, please accept that some people are hurt by these terms regardless. This isn't about policing anyone's thoughts and language—it's about courtesy and avoiding harm we never wanted to cause.

We all absorb bias from the culture around us, and we've *all* used some of the terms on this list without realizing there was a problem. That's okay! And since none of us are perfect, we'll slip up and still use them sometimes. That doesn't make anyone a bad person, and mistakes won't result in disciplinary action. Habits are just hard to change. What's important is that we keep trying.

Tip: Instead of trying to memorize these terms, focus on understanding the explanations. It's easier to avoid problematic terms by understanding *how* they can cause harm.

Terms

Race

Problematic	Suggestions	Explanation
Master / Slave	Primary / Secondary Leader / Follower Parent / Child Main / Replica Producer / Consumer	Slavery is one of the world's great evils. It inflicted enormous harm on several generations of Black people, impacted many other groups throughout history, and still exists today in the form of human trafficking.
Master	Expert (for a person) Leader (for a person) Main (for a branch) Trunk (for a branch) Principal (for data)	"Master" is connected to slavery, so try to avoid it when describing a person. Many companies are also removing this term from code repositories, such as GitHub (Microsoft) and Android (Google). Make an exception if there's genuinely no good alternative, such as a "master's degree".

Whitelist / Blacklist	Allow list / Deny list Include / Exclude	The term depends on understanding the untrue notion that “white is good, black is bad”.
White hat / Black hat	Tester / Intruder Security professional / Attacker	The term depends on understanding the untrue notion that “white is good, black is bad”.
White box / Black box	Clear / Opaque Open / Closed Visible / Hidden	The term is used to describe whether the internal function of something can be observed. It reinforces the biased notion that Black people “have something to hide” while white people don’t. It also subtly and falsely suggests that a Black person’s decision-making can’t be understood.
Grandfathered (or grandfather clause)	Legacy Exempt Exception	This references Black voter suppression laws enacted during the US Jim Crow era.
Native	Built-in Original First-party [Name of vendor]’s (e.g. Microsoft’s, Oracle’s, etc.)	Use with caution. When used to contrast a feature with a third-party replacement, it sends a subtle message that “Native isn’t good enough” which can disparage Indigenous people.
First-class citizen	Core feature Built-in Top-level	This term normalizes the idea of treating some groups of people as lesser than others.
Guru	Expert Authority Mentor	This is a Buddhist and Hindu term for a revered spiritual leader. Using it in other contexts may be disrespectful.
Token (when referring to people)	---	It’s fine to use “token” when discussing technical interactions (such as authentication), but it’s denigrating to describe a person as a “token [minority]”.
Tribe	Group Squad Crew	Using this term casually diminishes the importance of tribal association for Indigenous peoples.
Tribal knowledge	Institutional knowledge Group understanding Unwritten rules	Using this term casually diminishes the importance of tribal association for Indigenous peoples.
Totem pole (e.g. “low on the totem pole”)	Ranking Hierarchy	Totem poles typically have complex symbolic meanings. This use of the term is based in

		misunderstanding and lack of respect for Indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest.
Pow-wow	Huddle Meeting	Using this term for business meetings disparages the important cultural gatherings of some Native Americans.
Spirit animal	---	This references a religious or spiritual concept among some Native Americans. Misusing it contributes to cultural erasure.
Hold down the fort / Circle the wagons	Watch Secure Protect On-call	These terms originated with colonizers protecting literal forts and wagons from what they saw as “vicious” and “intruding” Native Americans.
On the warpath	Angry Furious	This term comes from the disrespectful stereotype of Native Americans as hostile, warlike, and primitive.

Disability

Problematic	Suggestions	Explanation
Blindly	Carelessly Thoughtlessly Ignorantly	Visual impairments do not make people incapable of good decision-making.
Fell on deaf ears	Disregarded Refused to consider Paid no attention	Hearing impairments do not make people unwilling to consider ideas.
Sanity check	Safety check Double-check Verify reasonableness Smoke test Quick check Second opinion	This term stigmatizes mental illness.
Crazy / Insane	Unreal Ridiculous Baffling Absurd	These terms stigmatize mental illness and may be considered offensive by some within the community.
Dummy value (or variable)	Placeholder Example	“Dummy” and similar terms stigmatize mental disabilities. The alternatives are clearer.
Crippled	Impacted performance Degraded performance Slowed down Inoperable	This term stigmatizes physical disabilities and is widely considered offense (though some disabled people are reclaiming it).

Lame	Poor Shoddy Foolish	This term stigmatizes people who have difficulty walking.
------	---------------------------	---

Gender and age

Problematic	Suggestions	Explanation
Guys	Everyone Folks You / You all	“Guys” is not inclusive of women. Although many women are fine with it, many others are not.
Girls	Women	In the workplace, this implies women are “less than” adults.
Grandmother (when referring to ease of use)	Novice Beginner Inexperienced	Phrases like “so easy your grandmother can use it” imply that older people, particularly women, can’t be experienced and competent with technology.
Male / Female (when referring to connections)	Plug / Port Connector / Socket	This is a sexual reference which reinforces heteronormativity and marginalizes transgender people.
Ninja / Rock star (when referring to skill level)	Expert Highly skilled Talented	When used in job postings, these terms tend to alienate women.
Fork	---	It’s fine to use “fork” in reference to source control systems, but avoid using it in an inappropriate sexual sense.

Other

Problematic	Suggestions	Explanation
Culture fit	---	This is often used to dismiss people that seem “different” in some hard-to-explain way. If we can’t explain the reason, it’s likely bias.
Diversity hire	---	This term implies that a person was hired to “check a box”, not for their skills and expertise.
Politically Correct / PC	Respectful Kind Welcoming Inclusive Considerate	This term is used as a pejorative when prioritizing the convenience of the speaker over the hurt caused to anyone else. We choose to make this effort not for appearances or to mollify anyone, but because trying to

		treat people better is simply the right thing to do.
--	--	--

Reminding others

When others use problematic terms, it's generally good to remind them that we prefer other terms. However, this must always be done **gently**. Our goal is to become a more positive and inclusive company, **not** to shame or embarrass each other for honest mistakes.

If you're on the receiving end of a reminder, it's common to feel defensive or guilty. That's okay, it's human nature. Try to take a step back and remember that we're *all* working on this. No one will assume that you wanted to harm anyone. The best response is to say "thank you" or "sorry", then move on and try to do better next time.

Examples

In a conversation among two or three people, someone refers to a whitelist. You could simply interject "oh, right, the allow list".

In a team meeting about a new rule, your manager says a client is grandfathered into the old rule. You might ask "could we call that a legacy exception instead?"

In a meeting with a client, your colleague talks about replacing a system's native functionality. Instead of interrupting and embarrassing them, you could offer a subtle reminder by referring to built-in functionality when it's your turn to speak.

In a company-wide meeting, the presenter might use a problematic term. They might notice their mistake and self-correct. If they continue using the problematic term, you could send a private reminder after the meeting if you're comfortable doing so. But in general, wait until after the meeting to avoid disrupting or distracting the presenter.

Limitations

It's impossible to list every problematic term, and such a long list wouldn't be very usable. This list prioritizes terms used frequently in tech and a few of the more common terms used in business generally. Further, it was compiled by a white person in North America so there may be some important omissions due to simple ignorance (despite having asked others for feedback).

Additional resources

- [Microsoft style guide: Bias-free communication](#)
- [Accessibility style guide by Alexandra White](#)
- [Words Matter: Finally, Tech Looks at Removing Exclusionary Language](#)
- [Dictionary.com: Stop Using These Phrases \(Use These Synonyms Instead\)](#)