Guide to Equitable Language in Grant Writing

No matter our nonprofit organization's mission or purpose, we all have an opportunity and responsibility to be on the side of striving for justice and dismantling racism. This work can start with challenging ourselves, our colleagues, and even our funders to use language that empowers, rather than disempowers, the people and groups our organizations engage and serve.

1 Use specific language rather than vague euphemisms.

We can lean on euphemisms like "at-risk" or "underserved" with good intentions to be non-offensive. But these labels can obscure our meaning. We gain clarity in specificity – for example, saying that "the majority of our students are Black and Latinx," if that's the case, as opposed to signaling, but not saying, race by using a label like "underrepresented."

2 Don't use an adjective in the place of a person.

If we use an adjective (like "homeless") in place of a person, we imply that a person is the condition that our organization attempts to address. And yet a person without shelter is not only a homeless person. They are a person experiencing homelessness, which acknowledges they are presently interacting with a situation and its attending challenges—but not that their identity and personhood is inseparable from this circumstance.

3 Allow people to define and describe themselves.

Is there an authority on how we should describe people? Yes: those people themselves. We must proactively engage with and listen to the people in our communities and the people we serve, in order to take their lead and understand their own language uses and preferences. That may mean acknowledging multiple preferences—in the autism community, for example, you might describe "autistic people and people with autism" based on varying preferences within that group.

4 Address systems, not just symptoms.

If we talk only about symptoms ("chronic high school dropout rates") and not their underlying systemic causes ("educational barriers prevalent in Black neighborhoods") we miss the the opportunity to present a bigger frame and a more compelling, complete case about the problems our organizations seek to address. Talking about both symptoms and systems also redirects the reader's understanding: from describing a personal issue that implies individuals are responsible to describing a systemic issue that we must correct as a society.

5 Move farther along the spectrum from "exploitive" to "empowered."

As writers, we have the power to make choices. We can use language that denies agency and oversimplifies a condition ("these poor, at-risk children") or we can actively seek to use language that denotes respect and dignity, and calls us to solve crucial societal challenges ("capable children who deserve to learn, but who face multiple obstacles"). By using specific language that acknowledges systems as well as symptoms, we can elicit empathy at the same time we empower people.

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- *Webinar recordings*
- *Equitable language resources*

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