



National Collaborating Centre  
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale  
des déterminants de la santé

# LANGUAGE AND HEALTH EQUITY: A CURATED LIST

*“Language and terms have the potential to perpetuate or reduce health inequities. The outcomes of efforts to achieve health equity will be diluted if there is no common understanding of the terms being used, or if these terms do not reflect community priorities.”<sup>1(p10)</sup>*

Health equity language both reflects and influences how we think about the root causes of health and, in turn, how we understand our role in addressing those root causes. Language, reflecting both power and culture, can make environments feel welcoming or unsafe, inclusive or discriminatory, respectful or stigmatizing. Therefore, intentional self-reflection and open dialogue are necessary for the development of inclusive language that can drive action on health equity.<sup>1</sup>

The National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH) has compiled this list of resources to support public health to develop and use inclusive health equity language. The resources included in this curated list explore broad principles for building a language that promotes action on health equity and that is person-first, system-focused and asset-based.<sup>1</sup> The search for and choice of resources were guided by their relevance to shifting health equity language and to creating an organizational and societal culture that supports action on the structural and social determinants of health and health equity.

This curated list describes eight grey-literature resources that were formative in the development of the document *Let's Talk: Language of health equity*.<sup>1</sup> Both of these documents complement the NCCDH's *Glossary of essential health equity terms*.<sup>2</sup> This list does not include a full collection of health equity terminology glossaries or communication guides for common messaging. It also does not reflect the depth and breadth of language guides currently available for public health priority areas such as mental health, substance use, racism, gender and sexuality, and Indigenous reconciliation.



### [Health equity guiding principles for inclusive communication](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US). [2022].

This 2022 online resource<sup>3</sup> outlines principles of inclusive internal and external public health

communications, including conversations with community and organizational partners. Key principles of inclusive communication include using person-first language, recognizing subpopulations and avoiding words that carry blame, violent connotations and stigma. Guidance for developing inclusive communications and the use of inclusive images is also offered, including considerations around culture, representation, disabilities and power. A list of resources and style guides for inclusive communications on topics including (but not limited to) accessibility, disability, racial health disparities and substance use is also provided. Applying a health equity lens to language use in public health is reinforced, highlighting the importance of recognizing diversity, respecting preferences for terminology, and engaging community members to codevelop health equity language.

### [Guide on equity, diversity and inclusion terminology](#)

Interdepartmental Terminology Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (Canada). [2022].



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This 2022 online terminology guide<sup>4</sup> serves as a bilingual glossary of terms associated with equity, diversity, accessibility and inclusion. Terms can be searched by keyword within definitions or by the term itself, and citations for original sources are included where appropriate. A total of 137 terms and definitions are provided, including key health equity areas of discrimination (e.g., ableism, ageism, anti-Semitism), bias and marginalization. The goal of this terminology guide is to improve understanding of key concepts related to equity, diversity, accessibility and inclusion, and to promote consistent use of language in these areas across Canadian federal government departments and agencies.



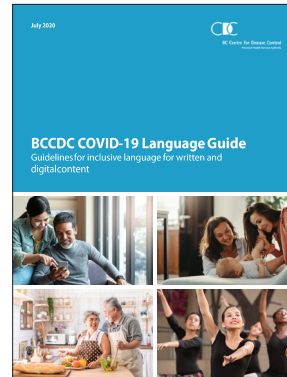


### [Guide de communication inclusive](#)

*Université du Québec.* [2021].

This 2021 French-language communication guide<sup>7</sup> describes the importance of reflecting equity, diversity and inclusion in francophone communications. Statistics

on gender, sexuality, disabilities, racialized groups and Indigenous peoples in Quebec set the context for this resource, which is divided into four sections focusing on written, visual, oral and public inclusive communication respectively. Key principles described throughout include the importance of gender-neutral language and terminology that do not reinforce bias and stereotypes. Consideration of how words and visuals reflect organizational image is also explored. There are examples of commonly used terms with more inclusive alternatives as well as numerous links to external resources. While this guide goes beyond the use of inclusive language specific to health equity (by exploring physical accessibility to public spaces and inclusive writing in academia, for example), the core concepts around intersectionality, person-first and overall inclusivity of communications is directly applicable to health equity work.



### [BCCDC COVID-19 language guide: Guidelines for inclusive language for written and digital content](#)

*British Columbia Centre for Disease Control.* [2020].

This 2020 document<sup>8</sup> explores the relationship between power and

language, and the importance of incorporating an equity lens into the language we use for print and digital public health communications. Developed specifically to inform COVID-19 messaging, this guide highlights that equity-focused language is evolving and must reflect key principles including trauma-informed, cultural humility, self-reflexivity, plain language and others. Commonly used terms and equity-focused alternatives are offered for disease basics, cultural identities, relationships and family status, age, abilities, mental health and a variety of other areas. This document informs inclusive pandemic and emergency preparedness communications, with principles that apply to many other public health issues.

**Language that promotes equity and dignity:  
Suggestions for health care providers**

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. [2017].



This 2017 tool<sup>9</sup> describes the importance of inclusive language in creating safe spaces for open communications between public health and communities who live with inequities. The importance of “preferred language” defined by community members is reinforced, as well as the necessity to reflect on power differentials that inform the language used in public health. The document includes a framework describing seven principles of language use based on Indigenous teachings of the Seven Natural Laws: respect, courage, wisdom, honesty, humility, truth and love. Examples of harmful labels with alternatives to reduce stigma and discrimination are also included. This resource offers a concrete framework for approaching conversations around inclusive language and developing an ongoing dialogue with coworkers and communities.

**DCFPI style guide for inclusive language**

DC Fiscal Policy Institute. [2017].



This 2017 style guide<sup>10</sup> is designed to support inclusive language and racial equity in writing. Central principles include using people-first and empowering language, self-identification, proper nouns, active voice, economic justice, race and ethnicity, and visual representation. Focusing on what affects health at a systems level, shifting away from labels, and using language that gives agency to people and communities is reinforced. The guide provides recommendations for talking about race and poverty, neighbourhoods, education, food and other topics, as well as lists of words to avoid and those to use instead for each of these areas. A glossary of key terms and definitions in the areas of oppression, justice, equity, power and race is also included. This document is structured around integrating a racial equity lens into how we speak and write about health, encouraging an approach that places humanity and community leadership at the centre of all health equity efforts.

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La version française est également disponible au [www.ccnds.ca](http://www.ccnds.ca) sous le titre *Terminologie et équité en santé : Une liste de lectures essentielles*.