

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

Inclusive and exclusive language

Sometimes, without meaning to, we write and say things that exclude others by using language that casts them as irrelevant, inferior, or non-existent. When a group is excluded from consideration and from having a voice, they are said to be **marginalised**.

We reveal our assumptions when we use exclusive language – when we talk about tradesmen instead of tradespeople, it implies that we think that all people who work in trades are male; from this, some may infer that the speaker thinks tradespeople should be male. Ultimately, we might discourage women and girls from trades. The use of ‘tradesman’ rather than ‘tradesperson’ might not be consciously chosen by the speaker at all – but it highlights the speaker’s assumptions.

By referring to you as ‘we’, I suggest that only people similar to me would use exclusive language. I imply that those dissimilar to me wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing. That too is a form of exclusive language – an ‘us and them’ mentality. When positive attributes are vaguely applied to a social group with all subtlety of a shovel-load of cement, this is problematic, sugar-coated idealism, and can signify that stereotypes are in play as well.

Which of the following can be factors in inclusive and exclusive language? Tick your selections.

Age	
Dietary restrictions (e.g. halal, kosher, vegan, vegetarian)	
Disability	
Education	
Family	
Gender	
Gender orientation (e.g. transgender)	
Job or career	
Marital status	
Parental status	

Physical appearance (e.g. weight, clothing)	
Political beliefs	
Race, ethnicity or nationality	
Religion	
Sexual preference	
Socioeconomic status	

Can you think of any others? List them.

The English language is rife with opportunities to include and exclude. The following are some real-world examples of unconscious exclusive language. Some examples include language that is quite consciously exclusive – and in these instances, it signifies deliberate discrimination. Correct each example so that it is inclusive, not exclusive, and explain why the original is exclusive.

1

NEW PATIENT QUESTIONNAIRE

All new patients must complete the following form prior to seeing the doctor.

Christian name:

Last name:

2 It cannot be denied that we Australians are hard-working, industrious people dedicated to mateship – to the notion of giving all Australians a fair go. It's not surprising, then, that we react strongly against the un-Australian elements of our society, those people who come here in the name of a better life but spend all their time trying to turn our country into theirs – oppressive, close-minded, and fanatical. They used to say 'when in Rome', well, when in Australia, do as Aussies do.

3 'I'm looking for a nurse who phoned me this morning – my father is ill.'

'Okay, do you have her name?'

4 Even with the best training, some dogs cannot get over the overwhelming urge to chase the postman down the street. Some dogs, it seems, lie in wait for the sound of the postie bike. It's a sure way to see your mail undelivered – and your dog labelled menacing. What can be done?

5 Those who talk about human nature seem to be arguing that all bad behaviour is hard-coded into our DNA. Others say that mankind is prone to violence, bigotry and uproar because God – by way of Eve – made us that way. Each camp argues in a manner that is almost fatalistic, and, in its way, allows us to excuse our own bad behaviour as something we couldn't help. Man has been historically violent, and this means the species is violent by nature – so why aim to end violence at all?

6 We are absolutely committed to paid maternity leave as a matter of policy. Women should not be devalued in the workplace for having families, and it is imperative that legalisation recognises this. As primary caregivers, women are responsible for the nurturing of the next generation. Punishing a woman for pregnancy – for bringing life into the world – is nothing short of discrimination.

7 The way a rape victim copes with the event is largely dependent upon her own inner strength, and her support network (comprising friends, family, counsellors, physicians and spiritual or religious advisers), as well as her age and the way that law enforcement officers respond to her during the reporting of the event. Many rape victims choose not to report the rape, just as many survivors of long-term childhood abuse never report the abuse, and the way that a victim can be further victimised by the legal process is no small factor in this. Many women never come forward to report abuse, rape, violence and assault because the trauma of the legal process is sometimes seen as exacerbating the original crime, rather than punishing it.

8 Piercings, head coverings, tattoos, make-up, skirts, shorts, beards, goatees, moustaches and dyed hair are not permitted in the workplace. Employees with short hair are required to keep their hair neatly trimmed and in a natural colour and they should be clean shaven. Employees with long hair are required to have hair pulled back from the face in a tidy ponytail or braid and in a natural colour. Hair accessories should be black or the same colour as the hair. Legs should be covered at all times and shoes should be black leather, fully enclosed, with no emblems or branding of any kind, and worn with white socks.

9 A marriage is a union between a man and a woman, to the exclusion of all others.

10 Women think about these things. Even as children they fantasise about the big wedding with the white dress, the church, and the guests. Men aren't like that. Most of them assume it's going to happen someday, at least according to Jane Austen:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. (*Pride and Prejudice*)

... But usually, they don't seek it out. Women are raised on Barbie dolls, romance novels, and chick flicks and the result is that they plan the wedding before meeting the groom.

In your opinion, why is it wrong or unfair to use exclusive language?