



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF THE SEAS

# **How we communicate in the SEA-EU Alliance**



# How we communicate in the SEA-EU Alliance: guidelines

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***“Language is power, in ways more literal than most people think. When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality. Why don’t more of us realize the connection between language and power?” – Julia Penelope (linguist, author, and philosopher)***

In alignment with SEA-EU’s mission to promote inclusion, diversity, and gender equality within its community, language is recognized as a powerful vehicle for thought, expression, and representation. Just as the SEA-EU Alliance seeks to bridge academic, cultural, and social gaps, language must also serve as a bridge rather than a barrier. In its form and structure, language can illuminate and promote inclusivity, or reinforce biases.

By adopting the strategies outlined in the following guidelines, our aim as the SEA-EU Alliance is to raise awareness, promote equality, and ensure that all voices are heard. Additionally, we strive to ensure that everyone feels represented and included. This objective seamlessly aligns with the broader goal of developing a robust, multidisciplinary educational framework that addresses today’s challenges and champions sustainability and cooperation for future generations. Increasingly, future generations expect universities to act as role models in the promotion of diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity. The collective impact can be strengthened through thoughtful and inclusive communication, upholding the commitment to a just and equitable European educational landscape.

These guidelines were developed as part of task 4.1 (“establishing a common understanding of language in sound and vision with the exchange of guidelines and recommendations”) by a working group of experts in gender equality, disability, and inclusion from SEA-EU universities. It is intended to serve as a frame of reference for all internal and external communication within the SEA-EU Alliance and its academic community. While it does not exhaustively cover all aspects of inclusive communication it presents key approaches for fostering respectful and equitable communication, ensuring that every member of the community, regardless of gender, gender identification, sexual orientation, ability, age, and cultural and ethnic origin feels fully represented. These guidelines encourage the academic community to apply equality in language, aiming to enhance inclusivity without mandating strict rules, removing specific terms, or altering historical texts. Communication should remain clear, readable, and accessible to its audience. Moreover, this guide will evolve as the SEA-EU Alliance encourages inclusive, effective communication in a diverse global society.

The work produced by the group is for recommendations in the English language, as this is the alliance’s language of communication. However, beyond linguistic considerations, this work also includes recommendations for general communication, attitude and mindset. It is also intended to be an invitation to all the universities in the alliance to continue thinking about inclusive communication applied to their national language and context.



## OVERALL GUIDELINES - HOW TO BE INCLUSIVE ON AN EVERYDAY ACADEMIC BASIS?

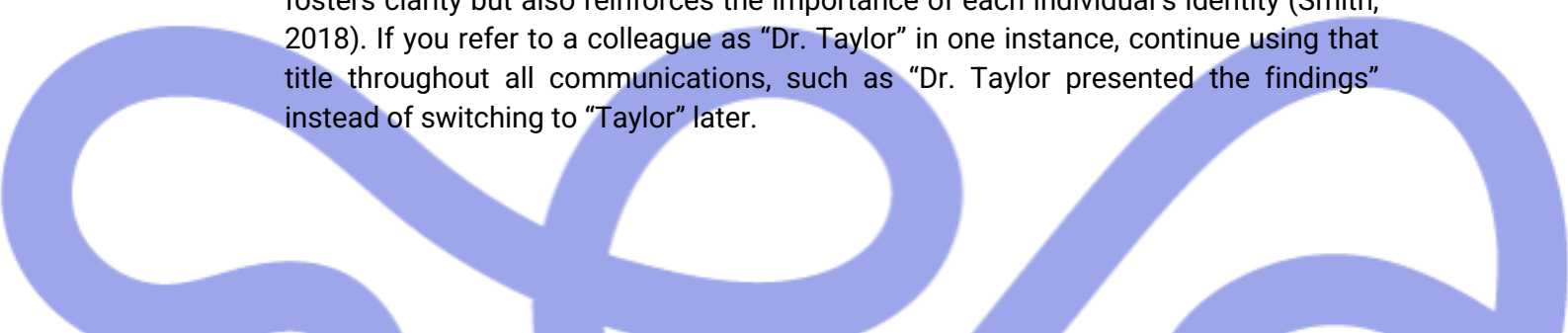
Inclusive communication ensures that we avoid excluding or discriminating against individuals based on their sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, or disability, and helps to prevent the reinforcement of sexism, ageism, racism, ableism, and any other form of prejudice. Recognizing the significant role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, inclusive language is a powerful tool that can be used to promote equality and break down stereotypes. **The inclusive communication aims to be just that: inclusive of all people, which means representative of all.** In our SEA-EU Alliance, we are proud to follow the inclusive language principles described below:

### Our philosophy and attitude

- **Respect Group Diversity:** Any interactions with others (colleagues or students) in our academic communities should be approached with care, recognizing the diversity within and among groups, and that each individual may hold multiple identities.
- **Create Safe Spaces:** Foster an environment in which everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves.
- **Use Person-Centric Language:** Focus on individuals rather than generalizing by group affiliation. Person-centric language avoids stereotypes and respects each person's individuality.
- **Adopt a Strengths-Based Approach:** Emphasize people's abilities, skills, and knowledge rather than focusing on perceived limitations or deficits.
- **Ask and Respect Preferences:** When appropriate, inquire about and honour individuals' language preferences, avoiding assumptions based on stereotypes or incomplete information. If speaking on behalf of a group, consult widely to ensure your language is representative and accurate.
- **Mind Your Words and Jokes:** Be aware of the implications of language choices. Avoid words that exclude, belittle, or marginalize individuals or groups.
- **Empower Self-Representation:** When possible, allow individuals or groups to speak for themselves.
- **Stay Informed about Cultural Sensitivities:** Regularly update your knowledge of cultural nuances to avoid unintentional offense in communication.
- **Educate Positively on Inclusive Language:** When addressing inappropriate language in others, explain why it is unsuitable and suggest more inclusive terms in a constructive and encouraging manner.
- **Show Cultural Humility:** Approach interactions with others, especially those from marginalized groups, as a learner rather than an expert. Recognize that understanding someone else's culture and experiences requires humility, continuous self-reflection, and a willingness to examine and challenge your own biases. Mistakes are part of this journey, so stay open to ongoing learning and personal growth. Seek feedback from colleagues regarding your use of inclusive language.



## Inclusive language & gender, gender identity & sexual orientation

- **Use Gender-sensitive language:** Consider whether mentioning gender will illuminate key aspects of the issue you are discussing. If it does, use gender-sensitive language; if it does not, opt for gender-neutral language. Avoid generic masculine. To widen representativity, instead of “women and men”, use “people”, and “everyone” could be “all of us”.
  - **Respect Personal Identity:** Address individuals without referencing their marital status unless it is relevant to the context. This practice respects personal identity and avoids assumptions, which can be particularly important in professional settings (Norton, 2015). Instead of saying “Mrs. Smith will lead the meeting”, say “Alex Smith will lead the meeting”. This avoids assumptions about marital status and focuses on the individual’s professional identity.
  - **Choose Respectful Language:** Opt for professional and respectful terms when referring to colleagues. For instance, use titles or roles rather than patronizing expressions. Studies show that respectful language contributes to a more positive workplace environment (Buchanan et al., 2019). Rather than referring to a colleague as “the new girl”, use their title: “the new project manager”. This maintains professionalism and shows respect for their role within the organization.
  - **Prioritize Inclusive Word Order:** Lead with “women and men” to promote balanced representation in language. This approach aligns with best practices in gender-inclusive communication, highlighting the importance of both genders equally (Kesebir, 2017). When discussing a team, say “women and men” instead of “men and women”. Or, for instance, to avoid gender, use “Our team includes individuals who excel in their fields”, which promotes a balanced representation.
  - **Refer to Inclusivity Resources:** Utilize glossaries and guides that focus on inclusive language to ensure your terminology is current and respectful. Resources include the following EU guide: *Toolkit on Gender-sensitive Communication: A resource for policymakers, legislators, media and anyone else with an interest in making their communication more inclusive*.
  - **Promote Respectful Representation:** Represent individuals with dignity and respect by focusing on their contributions rather than their appearance. This principle is crucial in fostering a culture that values skills and achievements over superficial traits (Ridgeway, 2011).
  - **Encourage Inclusive Descriptions:** Use language that reflects individual skills and abilities without reinforcing gender roles. Research emphasizes the importance of language in shaping perceptions of competence and can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes (Heilman, 2001). Instead of saying, “She is nurturing and good at organizing”, say “She excels in project management and team leadership”. This highlights skills without reinforcing traditional gender roles.
  - **Maintain Consistency in Naming:** Use consistent names and titles throughout your communications to show respect and equality for everyone. Consistency not only fosters clarity but also reinforces the importance of each individual’s identity (Smith, 2018). If you refer to a colleague as “Dr. Taylor” in one instance, continue using that title throughout all communications, such as “Dr. Taylor presented the findings” instead of switching to “Taylor” later.
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## Inclusive language & disabilities

- **Foster Safety, Respect, and Community:** Use inclusive language that values diversity to create a safe and respectful environment. Research shows that inclusive practices promote a sense of belonging and improve psychological safety within communities (Nishii, 2013). Language that acknowledges and celebrates diversity can help foster a more inclusive atmosphere. Use phrases like “Our diverse community is our strength” rather than “We tolerate differences”.
- **Build Language Around Strengths and Capabilities:** Adopt a strengths-based approach by focusing on individuals’ strengths and capabilities rather than their limitations. Studies indicate that strengths-based language can enhance self-esteem and motivation, particularly among persons with disabilities (Rapp & Goscha, 2012). This approach empowers individuals and encourages positive self-perception. Instead of saying, “She struggles with communication”, say, “She excels in visual presentations”.
- **Honour Persons with Disabilities as Active Participants:** Honour persons with disabilities as active participants in their lives by using respectful language that affirms their autonomy. Language that emphasizes agency supports the recognition of persons with disabilities as experts in their own experiences (Shakespeare, 2014). This perspective challenges traditional narratives that portray persons with disabilities solely as recipients of care. Use person-first language, such as “a person with a disability” instead of “a disabled person”.
- **Involve Individuals with Disabilities in Decision-Making:** Follow the principle of “Nothing about us without us” by involving individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes. This principle is rooted in advocacy for disability rights and emphasizes the importance of including disabled voices in discussions that affect their lives (Charlton, 1998). Engaging individuals in decisions fosters empowerment and ensures that their needs are accurately represented. For instance, when planning events or programs, actively seek input from individuals with disabilities, ensuring their voices are heard: “We’d love your feedback on how to make this event accessible”.
- **Consider Non-Apparent Disabilities:** Recognize that not all disabilities are visible. Many individuals have non-apparent disabilities that can affect their daily functioning, such as mental health conditions or chronic illnesses. Awareness of this diversity is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment (Hewitt, 2019). Using language that acknowledges both visible and invisible disabilities promotes understanding and empathy. For instance, say, “We understand that some needs may not be visible, and we encourage open communication about how we can support everyone”.
- **Uphold Inclusion as a Fundamental Human Right:** Uphold inclusion as a fundamental human right in all actions and communications. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasizes the importance of inclusion and participation for all individuals, regardless of ability (United Nations, 2006). By prioritizing inclusion in language and practice, we affirm the dignity and rights of every person. Advocate for policies that affirm inclusion by stating, “Access to education and employment is a fundamental right for all individuals, including those with disabilities”.

## Visual communication

- **Reflect Diversity:** Use images and case studies that represent a wide range of genders, ethnicities, and identities. This helps create an inclusive environment and fosters a sense of belonging for people from different backgrounds **Example:** When creating a presentation, include images of diverse individuals - different genders, ethnicities, and identities - engaged in a collaborative workspace rather than just homogeneous groups. For instance, use a photo of a team meeting that includes women, men, and non-binary individuals of various ethnic backgrounds.
- **Present Varied Roles:** Avoid discriminatory humour when depicting individuals in different capacities. In case studies or illustrations, depict professionals in diverse roles without relying on stereotypes. Instead of showing a nurse as a woman and a mechanic as a man, present a diverse range of people in both roles.
- **Portray Individuals Equally:** Address and show persons with disabilities the same as anyone else in your materials.
- **Use Inclusive Language:** Use inclusive language that transcends binary categories.
- **Recognize Biases:** Be aware that AI-generated images may carry biases.
- **Create Universally Accessible Materials:** Challenge yourself to create accessible materials. Aim to create materials that everyone can engage with by considering layout, colour contrast, font size, and alternative text.
- **Ensure accessibility:** For a video presentation, include closed captions and transcripts that convey spoken content. When designing visual materials, ensure that text is large enough to read from a distance, and use colour combinations that are accessible to those with colour blindness (e.g., avoiding red-green combinations).
- **Maintain Energy:** Keep your visuals engaging and dynamic. Use visuals such as infographics, animated transitions, and varied layouts to keep the audience engaged. Incorporate multimedia elements like video clips or interactive polls to enhance audience interaction and energy.
- **Use Alternative Text:** Include alternative (alt) text for images so those who use screen readers can understand your visual content. Alt text should be concise yet descriptive enough to convey the key elements of the image. For an image of a diverse group collaborating, the alt text could read: "A diverse team of five individual - two women, one man, and two non-binary individuals - gathered around a table, discussing ideas with laptops and notes". This description provides essential context for those using screen readers.

## Inclusive language & age

- **Avoid Stereotypical Terms:** Refrain from using terms like "seniors," "elderly," "the aged," or "ageing dependents", as these suggest separation from broader society and reinforce stereotypes.
- **Avoid using language that frames ageing negatively** or as a barrier to overcome. Ensure that your language reflects ageing as a natural part of life, distinct from illness or disorder. When discussing health resources, instead of saying, "Overcoming the

challenges of ageing”, you could frame it positively: “Embracing the opportunities that come with ageing”. This highlights the positive aspects of growing older rather than framing it as a burden.

- **Use Consistent Age Descriptors:** Avoid setting “adults” against “older adults”. Instead, use comparable labels such as “younger, middle-aged, and older adults” or “early adulthood, midlife, and later life” to ensure age categories are neutrally and respectfully defined.
- **Replace Outdated Terms:** Substitute “geriatric pregnancy” with “advanced maternal age” or specify the age directly, such as “pregnancy at age 35 or older” (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2022), to avoid outdated and potentially stigmatizing language.

## **Inclusive language & ethnicity and culture**

- **Avoid Positioning One Group as the Norm:** Language often positions the main nationality as the standard, with other groups viewed as “minorities” or “outgroups” and expected to assimilate to the local ways, norms, and traditions, thus not allowing for the appreciation of cultural diversity.
- **Reference Ethnic or Racial Backgrounds Only When Necessary:** When working with an individual or groups of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, refer to their different background only when it is directly relevant to the context. Avoid using ethnic or racial identifiers unless there is a clear, valid reason.
- **Avoid Positive and Negative Stereotyping:** Both majority and minority groups are frequently described with bias; actions of majority groups are often framed positively, while minority group actions may be negatively portrayed. Both positive and negative stereotypes are discriminatory as they overlook personal individuality and reinforce generalized expectations.
- **Acknowledge Diversity Within Groups:** Broad terms like “African” or “Arab” can erase the diversity within these groups. African communities represent various ethnicities and cultures, and “Arab” encompasses people from multiple countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. Recognize and reflect this diversity to avoid erasing individual identities.
- **Avoid Essentialism:** Avoid language that essentializes or reinforces rigid concepts of race, as it is generally inappropriate and discouraged. Phrases like “the Black race” or “the White race” suggest a monolithic view of human groups, which can reinforce stereotypes and overlook individual diversity within racial groups.



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