



# **THE DC BAR FOUNDATION'S RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE STYLE GUIDE**

Written by the Development and Communications Team

DC BAR FOUNDATION

WE INVEST IN JUSTICE

**DCBF**

# **Racial Equity and Inclusive Language Style Guide**

## **The District of Columbia Bar Foundation**

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## I. Introduction

The DC Bar Foundation is on a journey essential for all justice-seeking organizations. In September 2019, the Foundation committed to a bold and visionary goal: **"To transform the civil legal aid network, working closely with all stakeholders."** We adopted a framework with five strategies to achieve that goal, including **"to infuse racial justice and racial equity in our work."**

By **racial justice**, we mean transforming society to eliminate racial hierarchies and advancing collective liberation so that all communities have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to thrive fully. And by **racial equity**, we mean the process of moving towards the vision of racial justice, including measurable milestones and outcomes.

The Foundation is in its fifth year of providing racial equity and racial justice workshops for our program partners. Board members and staff have also participated in similar workshops. From April to September 2021, we commissioned racial equity assessments of the Foundation's grantmaking processes, operations, and overall structure. Subsequently, we changed how we approach our work based on learnings from those studies.

In August 2022, the Foundation adopted five core values, including: *"We Stand Against Anti-Black Racism. We must work within ourselves, our networks, and our institutions to challenge anti-Black racism with each decision we make. We must actively change behaviors, policies, and procedures that perpetuate anti-Black racism. Understanding and addressing anti-Black racism will help reveal solutions to eradicate the manifestation of all forms of bias, racism, and hate."*

DC Bar Foundation staff have created this Racial Equity and Inclusive Language Style Guide, drawing on guides produced by a diverse group of organizations listed in the Appendix. This Style Guide aims to ensure that our communications display diverse visuals, amplify asset-based language, reach diverse audiences, and have messages consistent with our racial justice and racial equity aspiration.

We understand that language is constantly evolving, as will this Style Guide. Those using the Racial Equity and Inclusive Language Style Guide are encouraged to ask questions, offer suggestions, and note omissions. Please don't hesitate to reach out to [communications@dcbfoundation.org](mailto:communications@dcbfoundation.org)

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## **II. Guiding Principles**

### **A. Use people-first language**

People-first language places personhood at the center and considers all other descriptive social identities that one holds as secondary and non-essential. People-first language means recognizing that everyone is, first and foremost, a person, not a particular characteristic or identity. As such, do not permanently define a person or group of persons with an adjective (e.g., low-income families, homeless people, underserved community). Instead, use people-first language, such as families with low incomes, a person who is unhoused, or communities that historically have been denied resources. **Note:** Though this is our overall best practice, this principle may be subject to change on a case-by-case basis, based on the self-identification preferences of individual communities (see Guiding Principle C below).

### **B. Reflect self-awareness and humility**

Equity-focused writing acknowledges one's own power and privilege. It is especially true for those engaged in philanthropy, where there are often vastly asymmetric power dynamics. It is important to avoid creating a "savior narrative" when depicting the relationship between funder and grantee, and grantee and client. Especially when we are new to a conversation, a collaboration, a community, or an area of work, we need to acknowledge our newness and those who have come before us. In addition, we must recognize all aspects of our history — including parts that may not be flattering — without trying to justify them or explain them away. Remember, "progress, not perfection." Sometimes, you will get it wrong. Acknowledge it, and commit to doing better next time. Change is a process, and we must hold each other accountable in a supportive way.

### **C. Honor self-identification**

Equity-focused writing should use language that respects and reflects how people talk about themselves. Allowing people to self-identify can help validate experiences, cultures, and struggles. A person's chosen labels can serve as a quick and easy way of explaining their lived experience within a community. Wherever categorization and labels are used to oppress groups of people, self-identification becomes an act of resistance. People who are denied opportunities to self-identify lose not just words that carry political power but may also lose aspects of their culture, agency, and spirit. It is always more important to honor the preferences of a person or group regarding their identity than to be consistent about how we prefer to identify them.

### **D. Remember that everyone owns their own story**

Equity-focused writing invites people to tell their own stories in their way and with their own words. Everyone should have input into whether, how, when, and where the story is told, and they should have final approval rights. Any desire for consistency on our part does not supersede a person's or group's right to use language that accurately represents their story. Our stories should be healthy and mutually beneficial, not extractive or exploitative. Also, be alert to the risk of tokenism — the practice of making

only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to include members of an underrepresented group to give the appearance of equality or diversity.

### **E. Use asset-based language, images, and framing**

Equity-focused writing defines people and communities by their strengths, aspirations, and contributions rather than the challenges, deficits, and oppression they face. Asset-based language avoids stigmatizing or negative narratives about individuals, groups, and communities (e.g., at-risk, low-income, vulnerable, blighted, and high-crime). It does not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or portray people and communities as objects of charity for philanthropists. It frames issues with an agency lens rather than depicting people living in poverty as helpless. Asset-based framing does not mean we never address the challenges or issues people or communities face. It means we shouldn't lead with or center those challenges and issues and should never reduce a group or person to a circumstance or challenge they face.

Consider whether what you are writing — or depicting visually through a photo or illustration — has embedded stereotypes that need to be avoided or removed. Make it a practice to have someone else review the language/imagery you are using from an equity perspective and to identify the use of any stereotypes specifically. Try to strike a balance between intentionally including people of color in images, being conscious of the context, and not reinforcing stereotypes or equating poverty with people of color. It's also important to show people of color in leadership roles (e.g., professionals and teachers) and not just reinforce poverty imagery.

### **F. Use proper nouns**

Equity-focused writing conveys respect, understanding, and acceptance by using the names and proper nouns used for and by people, places, and organizations. Overuse of pronouns such as it, that, and this may leave the reader wondering who the writer is talking about at a critical point in the story. If you find yourself relying on generalizations, research the groups of people, topics, or locations that are the subject of your writing.

### **G. Identify systemic issues**

Equity-focused writing presents issues as the product of systems — patterns of behavior and inequities requiring systemic solutions and root-cause interventions — rather than isolated incidents. It names perpetrators of violence and harm directly. It provides an opportunity to root out implicit bias toward status quo systems of power by naming the actors of oppression, whether human, institutional, or cultural. In particular, we should consistently and explicitly name the role and impact of systemic racism and white supremacy in creating and holding in place the racial inequities we see today in our society. By intentionally incorporating and naming race in our work, we can understand the relationship between historical context and the way things are today, which better equips us to move towards addressing these deeply entrenched inequalities and biases at their roots.

### III. Core Examples

#### A. Race and Ethnicity

- Generally, use Black rather than African American unless this is the preferred language in a specific situation.
- Capitalize Black, since this is how most Black people identify. When referring to cultures, ethnicities, and groups of people, names are often capitalized to reflect reality and respect.
- Do not capitalize white, as "white" and whiteness are not an identity but a social construct that reinforces power structures.
- "People of Color" can be used as a collective term for non-white people; this is preferable to saying "minorities" and is used as an inclusive and unifying frame across different non-white racial groups to address racial inequities.
- Use Latinx (pronounced "La-TEEN-ex") rather than Latino, Latina, or Latin@. This is a gender-inclusive way to refer to people of Latin American descent.

#### B. Gender

- Always use preferred personal pronouns, which include she/her, he/him, and they/them. If you are unsure of a person's pronouns, use more specific language, such as "The client sought civil legal aid services earlier this year for their housing issue."
- Do not use gender-specific words or titles that identify a particular sex or gender. For example, instead of "The chairwoman will speak in 30 minutes" say "The chairperson will speak in 30 minutes."
- When writing, if you do not know a person's preferred pronoun, do not use the "Mr." or "Ms." title. Instead, use their full name. For individuals who identify as non-binary, the gender-neutral title is "Mx."
- Do not say things like "both genders" as this implies there are only two genders. The inclusive phrase is "all genders."

#### C. LGBTQ+

- Do not use the word "transsexual" or any other derogatory language for someone whose gender does not align with the one they were assigned at birth. The correct term is "trans" or "transgender."
- When describing someone whose gender aligns with the one they were assigned at birth, use the term "cisgender."
- Instead of saying "sexual preference," use the LGBTQ+-inclusive term "sexual orientation."
- Always use the terms "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," or "queer" instead of "homosexual," as this word is often used as a pejorative by anti-LGBTQ+ individuals.

- Unless necessary, do not label a relationship as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. The term “same-sex couple” is also acceptable if required.

#### **D. Immigration**

- Always use “undocumented immigrant/worker” instead of “illegal immigrant” or “illegal worker.” Use “illegal” only to describe a circumstance or action, not a person. NEVER use the term “alien” when referring to an undocumented immigrant.
- Do not specify a person’s immigration status unless it is a relevant part of the story and if it has been approved to share by the source.
- Use the term “mixed-status couple/family” to describe couples or families comprised of people with different immigration statuses.
- Emphasize the importance of unifying families to keep them together.

#### **E. Persons with Low Incomes**

- Utilize person-first language in general, but especially when using the descriptor “low-income.” For example, “X is a person with low-income” vs “X is low-income.”
- Avoid the following terms: [poor, needy, unskilled labor, less fortunate, etc.] and instead use the following terms: [people experiencing poverty, person experiencing homelessness, etc.]
- When writing about people with low incomes, frame poverty as a collective/community issue rather than an individual issue that can be solved at an individual level.
- Similarly, focus your writing on the barriers that prevent people with low incomes from obtaining financial stability.

#### **E. Persons Living with Disabilities**

- Use person-first language. Examples: person with a developmental disability, person with an intellectual disability, person with Down Syndrome. Note that the Deaf community typically prefers identity first language, and a growing number of people on the autism spectrum do as well. As always, use whichever term is preferred by the audience you’re speaking with.
- Mention a person’s disability, disorder, disease, or other health condition only when it is relevant and when there is a medical diagnosis.
- Emphasize abilities, not limitations. For example, uses a wheelchair rather than confined to a wheelchair. Wheelchairs and other assistive devices enable their users to be more independent; wheelchair user emphasizes a person's mobility, but confined to a wheelchair is an explicit reference to limitations on a person's mobility.

## **Appendix A - DC Bar Foundation's Core Values (Adopted August 2022\*)**

**Equitable Justice.** The impact of race, class, and gender on systemic injustice is interconnected. We seek equitable justice, which is concerned with transforming systems and must be inclusive and accessible to everyone regardless of race, wealth, gender, or power. It extends beyond the law into other systems and resources.

**Community-Centric.** We are guided by the voices of those most impacted by our decisions. We are working to ensure the civil legal aid system is accountable and responsive to DC's communities most affected by systemic injustice.

**Collaboration and Partnership.** Our work is most effective when we collaborate with all stakeholders. We will always ask the questions: Who else should be at this table? Are all voices at the table being heard?

**Mutual Trust and Respect.** Respecting others' capacities and contributions will foster a community where ideas are heard, and problems are solved. We seek and offer mutual trust and respect so that greater progress is made toward our mission of equitable justice.

**We Stand Against Anti-Black Racism.** We must work within ourselves, our networks, and our institutions to challenge anti-Black racism with each decision we make. We must actively change behaviors, policies, and procedures that perpetuate anti-Black racism. Understanding and addressing anti-Black racism will help reveal solutions to eradicate the manifestation of all forms of bias, racism, and hate.

\*In April 2021, DCBF staff began working with [Building for Mission](#) to identify core values to guide the Foundation's work. Core values are deeply ingrained principles that guide all of an organization's actions; they serve as its cultural cornerstones. Over the next 16 months, staff had many conversations that led to adopting five core values in August 2022.



## **Appendix B - List of organizations and references consulted in preparing DCBF's Racial Equity and Inclusive Language Style Guide**

### **American Chemical Society**

[ACS Inclusivity Style Guide](#) (January 2022)

### **American Medical Association and AAMC Center for Health Justice**

[Advancing Health Equity: A Guide to Language, Narrative and Concepts](#)  
(October 2021)

### **Bainum Family Foundation**

DEI Equity Language Style Guide  
Foundation Editorial Style Guide

### **DC Fiscal Policy Institute**

[DCFPI Style Guide for Inclusive Language](#) (December 2017)

### **Ekō (formerly SumOfUs)**

[A Progressive's Style Guide](#) (July 19, 2016)

### **Frameworks Institute**

[Changing the Conversation on Social Issues](#)

### **ICARE (Illinois Community of Advocates for Racial Equity)**

[Illinois Legal Aid Race Equity Toolkit](#) (March 31, 2016)

### **Interaction Institute for Social Change**

### **National Assembly of State Arts Agencies**

[Inclusive Language Guide](#)

### **National Recreation and Park Association**

[Equity Language Guide](#) (Updated on October 21, 2021)

### **The Opportunity Agenda (TOA)**

[Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit](#)

### **The University of Iowa**

[DEI Style Guide](#) (Updated on May 18, 2023)