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Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative

The Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative (EHLI) is a multi-phase, multi-year project to address harmful language in IT at Stanford. EHLI is one of the actions prioritized in the Statement of Solidarity and Commitment to Action, which was published by the Stanford CIO Council (CIOC) and People of Color in Technology (POC-IT) affinity group in December 2020.

The goal of the Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative is to eliminate* many forms of harmful language, including racist, violent, and biased (e.g., disability bias, ethnic bias, ethnic slurs, gender bias, implicit bias, sexual bias) language in Stanford websites and code.

The purpose of this website is to educate people about the possible impact of the words we use. Language affects different people in different ways. We are not attempting to assign levels of harm to the terms on this site. We also are not attempting to address all informal uses of language.

This website focuses on potentially harmful terms used in the United States, starting with a list of everyday language and terminology.** Our "suggested alternatives" are in line with those used by peer institutions and within the technology community.***

Content Warning: This website contains language that is offensive or harmful. Please engage with this website at your own pace.

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Ableist

Ableist language is language that is offensive to people who live with disabilities and/or devalues people who live with disabilities. The unintentional use of such terms furthers the belief that people who live with disabilities are abnormal.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
addict	person with a substance use disorder	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
addicted	hooked, devoted	Trivializes the experiences of people who deal with substance abuse issues.
basket case	nervous	Originally referred to one who has lost all four limbs and therefore needed to be carried around in a basket.
blind review	anonymous review	Unintentionally perpetuates that disability is somehow abnormal or negative, furthering an ableist culture.
blind study	masked study	Unintentionally perpetuates that disability is somehow abnormal or negative, furthering an ableist culture.
committed suicide	died by suicide	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with mental health conditions.
confined to a wheelchair	person who uses a wheelchair	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics. Also, users of wheelchairs often find them to be an essential tool for their freedom instead of thinking of them as a prison.
crazy	surprising/wild	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with mental health conditions.
cripple (n), crippled (adj)	person with a disability	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
crippled (v)	disabled, impaired or weakened	Unnecessarily equates the weakening of something with people living with disabilities.
dumb	non-vocal, non-verbal	Once used to describe a person who could not speak and implied the person was incapable of expressing themselves.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
handicap parking	accessible parking	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
handicapped	person with a disability	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
handicapped space	accessible space	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
insane	surprising/wild	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with mental health conditions.
lame	boring, uncool	Ableist language that can trivialize the experience of people living with disabilities.
mentally ill	person living with a mental health condition	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
OCD	detail-oriented	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with mental health conditions.
paraplegic	person with a spinal cord injury, person who is paralyzed	This term generalizes a population of people while also implying that people with disabilities are not capable.
quadriplegic	person with a spinal cord injury, person who is paralyzed	This term generalizes a population of people while also implying that people with disabilities are not capable.
retard (n)	person with a cognitive disability, person with autism, neurodivergent person	This term is a slur against those who are neurodivergent or have a cognitive disability.
retarded (adj)	boring, uncool	This term is a slur against those who are neurodivergent or have a cognitive disability. It should not be used to make a point about a person, place or thing.
sanity check	confidence check, coherence check, fact check	This term could be offensive to those dealing with mental health issues.
spaz	clumsy	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
stand up meeting	quick meeting	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
tone deaf	unenlightened	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
walk-in	drop-in, open office	Ableist language that trivializes the experiences of people living with disabilities.
wheelchair bound	person who uses a wheelchair	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics. Also, users of wheelchairs often find them to be an essential tool for their freedom instead of thinking of them as a prison.

Ageism

Ageist language singles out a person based on their age instead of their qualifications.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
gray beard	the person's name	It calls out an older, and presumably more experienced, IT or cybersecurity person by referring to their age instead of their name.
senile	person suffering from senility	This term is often used disparagingly to refer to older people whose mental faculties appear to be in decline.

Colonialism

Colonialism is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. It is better to avoid terms that derive from colonialism.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
Philippine Islands	Philippines or the Republic of the Philippines	The term is politically incorrect and denotes colonialism. Some people of Filipino heritage might use the term, though.

Culturally Appropriative

Culturally appropriative language misuses terms that hold meaning to a particular culture in a way that often lacks respect or appreciation.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
Brave (n)	none/do not use	This term perpetuates the stereotype of the "noble courageous savage," equating the Indigenous male as being less than a man.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
bury the hatchet	call for peace, call a truce	Using this term is cultural appropriation of a centuries-old tradition among some North American Indigenous Peoples who buried their tools of war as a symbol of peace.
chief	the person's name	Calling a non-Indigenous person "chief" trivializes both the hereditary and elected chiefs in Indigenous communities. Calling an Indigenous person "chief" is a slur.
Geronimo	none/only use when discussing the historical figure	Geronimo was a famous leader and medicine man whose name is used today as a caricature of the brave warrior, often during "macho" pursuits.
guru	expert, subject matter expert (SME), primary, leader, teacher, guide	In the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, the word is a sign of respect. Using it casually negates its original value.
low man on the totem pole	lacking seniority, don't have the power or prestige	Trivializes something that is sacred to Indigenous peoples. Also, in some First Nation communities, being low on the totem pole is actually a higher honor than being on top. The term also reinforces male-dominated language.
on the warpath	mad, on the offensive	Cultural appropriation of a term that referred to the route taken by Indigenous people heading toward a battle with an enemy.
Pocahontas	the person's name	This is a slur and should not be used to address an Indigenous woman unless that is her actual name.
pow wow, powwow (verb)	meet, get together	Using this term in this manner demeans a term of cultural significance to Indigenous peoples.
spirit animal	favorite animal, animal I most admire or would like to be	The term refers to an animal spirit that guides/protects one on a journey, so to equate it with an animal one likes is to demean the significance of the term.
too many chiefs, not enough indians	a lack of clear direction, too many competing ideas	Trivializes the structure of Indigenous communities.
tribal knowledge	institutional knowledge	This term trivializes the ancestral knowledge handed down through generations of Indigenous peoples.
tribe	friends, network, family, support system	Historically used to equate Indigenous people with savages.

Gender-Based

Gender-based language includes a range of words and phrases that are not helpful, and, in many cases, are exclusionary. Some people may not mind having the term(s) applied to them or even prefer having the term used. It's always preferable to ask a person how they want to be addressed instead of making assumptions.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
"preferred" pronouns	pronouns	The word "preferred" suggests that non-binary gender identity is a choice and a preference.
balls to the wall	accelerate efforts	Attributes personality traits to anatomy.
ballsy	bold, risk-taker	Attributes personality traits to anatomy.
chairman/chairwoman	chairperson, chair	Lumps a group of people using gender binary language, which doesn't include everyone.
congressman/congresswoman	congressperson, legislator	Lumps a group of people using gender binary language, which doesn't include everyone.
fireman/firemen	firefighter(s)	Lumps a group of people using masculine language and/or into gender binary groups, which don't include everyone.
freshman	frosh, first-year student	Lumps a group of students using masculine language and/or into gender binary groups that don't include everyone.
gentlemen	everyone	Lumps a group of people using masculine language and/or into gender binary groups, which don't include everyone.
guys	folks, people, everyone	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
have the balls to	bold, risk-taker	Attributes personality traits to anatomy.
he	person's name or "they"	Unless you know the person you're addressing uses "he" as their pronoun, it is better to use "they" or to ask the person which pronouns they use.
hermaphrodite (referring to a person)	intersex person	This term has historically been used as a slur against LGBTQ+ people.
ladies	everyone	Lumps a group of people using gender binary language that doesn't include everyone.
landlord/landlady	property owner	Lumps a group of people using gender binary language, which doesn't include everyone.
mailman	mail person, postal carrier, letter carrier	Lumps a group of public servants using masculine language and/or into gender binary groups, which don't include everyone.
man (verb)	staff	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
man hours	person hours, effort hours, labor time	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
man-in-the-middle	person-in-the-middle	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
mankind	people, humankind, human beings	This term reinforces male-dominated language.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
manmade	made by hand	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
manpower	workforce, staffing, staff resources, personnel resources	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
policeman / policemen / policewoman / policewomen	police officer(s)	Lumps a group of people using gender binary language, which doesn't include everyone.
seminal	leading, groundbreaking	This term reinforces male-dominated language.
she	person's name or "they"	Unless you know the person you're addressing uses "she" as their pronoun, it is better to use "they" or to ask the person which pronouns they use.
shemale	transgender woman, trans woman	This slur is often used disparagingly to refer to people who don't conform to gender expectations. Some in the community do identify with and self-describe as the term, though.
tranny, trannie	transgender person, trans or non-gendering conforming folk	This slur is often used disparagingly to refer to people who don't conform to gender expectations. Some in the community do identify with and self-describe as the term, though.
transgendered	transgender	This term avoids connections that being transgender is something that is done to a person and/or that some kind of transition is required.
transsexual (unless used medically)	transgender person, trans or non-gendering conforming folk	This term has historically been used as a slur against LGBTQ+ people. Some in the community do identify with and self-describe as the term, though.
you guys	folks, people, everyone	Lumps a group of people using masculine language and/or into gender binary groups, which don't include everyone.

Imprecise Language

Imprecise language is terms that utilize euphemisms, vagueness, or inaccurate words to not say what one is trying to say.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
abort	cancel/end	This term can unintentionally raise religious/moral concerns over abortion.
American	US Citizen	This term often refers to people from the United States only, thereby insinuating that the US is the most important country in the Americas (which is actually made up of 42 countries).

Instead of	Consider using	Context
child prostitute	child who has been trafficked	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
circle the wagons	take a defensive position	Hollywood movies about settlers migrating west contributed greatly to the formation of this phrase, which means that "savages" are coming and a group of (White) people is about to be attacked. It also paints Indigenous Peoples as the aggressors.
half-breed	person of multiple ethnicities	This term is generally considered to be a slur against those of mixed race. Some in the community do identify with and self-describe as the term, though.
Hispanic	Latinx, use country of origin	Although widely used to describe people from Spanish-speaking countries outside of Spain, its roots lie in Spain's colonization of South American countries. Instead of referring to someone as Hispanic because of their name or appearance, ask them how they identify themselves first.
Indian giver	person who takes something back that was given, one who expects an equivalent gift in return for one that was given	This term likely derives from misunderstandings about trade customs in early relationships between Indigenous people and White settlers. It is a slur that should not be used to describe anyone.
Indian summer	late summer	This term infers that Indigenous people are chronically late. While it may be innocently used to describe a beautiful time of year, it could have an unintended negative impact on those who hear it.
Karen	demanding or entitled White woman	This term is used to ridicule or demean a certain group of people based on their behaviors.
Oriental	person of Asian descent. Better yet, use the specific cultural heritage (Chinese, Japanese, etc.) if known.	This term is seen as pejorative as it racializes people of Asian descent as forever opposite "others." (Occidental vs Oriental)
peanut gallery	audience, hecklers or critics	This term refers to the cheapest and worst section in theaters where many Black people sat during the Vaudeville era.
people of color (used generically)	BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)	If speaking about a specific group, name that group.
straight	heterosexual	This term implies that anyone who is not heterosexual is bent or not "normal."
stupid	boring, uncool	Once used to describe a person who could not speak and implied the person was incapable of expressing themselves.
survivor	person who has experienced..., person who has been impacted by...	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their experiences. If the person identifies with the term, then use it.
tarbaby	difficult problem	This is a dismissive term for a Black person.
thug	suspect or criminal	Although the term refers to a violent person or criminal, it often takes on a racist connotation when used in certain circles.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
user	client	While often associated with one who uses (software, systems, services), it can also negatively be associated with those who suffer from substance abuse issues or those who exploit others for their own gain.
victim	person who has experienced..., person who has been impacted by	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their experiences. If the person identifies with the term, then use it.

Institutionalized Racism

Institutionalized Racism is racism that is embedded in the laws and regulations of a society or an organization. It can be seen in processes, attitudes, and behavior through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
barrio	specific name of neighborhood	The term indicates any socially segregated non-white neighborhood.
black hat	malicious, criminal, unethical hacker	Assigns negative connotations to the color black, racializing the term.
black mark	something that is held against one	Assigns negative connotations to the color black, racializing the term.
black sheep (referring to a person)	outcast	Assigns negative connotations to the color black, racializing the term.
blackballed	banned, denied	Assigns negative connotations to the color black, racializing the term.
blackbox	hidden, mystery box, opaque box, flight recorder	Assigns negative connotations to the color black, racializing the term.
blacklist/blacklisted	denylist/disallowed	Assigns negative connotations to the color black, racializing the term.
brown bag	lunch and learn, tech talk	Historically associated with the "brown paper bag test" that certain Black sororities and fraternities used to judge skin color. Those whose skin color was darker than the brown bag were not allowed to join.
cakewalk	easy, simple	Enslaved people covertly used exaggerated dance to mock their enslavers. This turned into "balls" that the White enslavers would hold for entertainment where the prize was a cake.
gangbusters	very successful	Unnecessarily invokes the notion of police action against "gangs" in a positive light, which may have racial undertones.
ghetto	use neighborhood's name	The term indicates any socially segregated non-white neighborhood.
grandfather	legacy	This term has its roots in the "grandfather clause" adopted by Southern states to deny voting rights to Blacks.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
grandfathered	legacy status	This term has its roots in the "grandfather clause" adopted by Southern states to deny voting rights to Blacks.
gray hat hacker	hactivist	Hacker who exploits a weakness in cyber defense to bring the weakness to the attention of the owner, with the goal of improving security. This term combines black hat and white hat, which both hold racial connotations.
master (adj)	primary, main	Historically, masters enslaved people, didn't consider them human and didn't allow them to express free will, so this term should generally be avoided.
master (v)	become adept in	Historically, masters enslaved people, didn't consider them human and didn't allow them to express free will, so this term should generally be avoided.
master list	list of record, canonical list	Historically, masters enslaved people, didn't consider them human and didn't allow them to express free will, so this term should generally be avoided.
red team	cyber offense team	"Red" is often used disparagingly to refer to Indigenous peoples, so its use in this context could be offensive to some groups.
scalper/scalping (referring to sales or trade)	reseller/opportunist	This term refers to the practice of removing a piece of an enemy's scalp with hair still attached. Although both colonizers and Indigenous Peoples performed the practice, it was used as proof of how savage the Natives were. Yet the colonizers were the ones who paid cash bounties for Native scalps, as has been documented in the United States, Canada and Mexico.
Scrum Master	agile lead, scrum leader	Historically, masters enslaved people, didn't consider them human and didn't allow them to express free will, so this term should generally be avoided.
slave (adj)	secondary, replica, worker	The historical context of this term involved oppression of a group of people who were enslaved, thought of as less than human and unable to exercise free will.
slave labor	unfair work practices, underpaid, overworked	References a time when enslavement of people (in particular Black Americans) was allowed.
sold down the river	betrayed	This term originally referred to a person who was enslaved who was sold as punishment.
tarball	tar archive	While the term refers to an archive that has been created with the tar command, it can be negatively associated with the pejorative term tarbaby.
to call a spade a spade/ calling a spade a spade	to call something what it is / calling something what it is	Although the term has its origins in Greek literature, the subsequent negative connotations with the word "spade" means that the phrase should be used with caution or not at all.
uppity	arrogant, stuck up	Although the term originated in the Black community to describe another Black person who didn't know their socioeconomic place, it was quickly adopted by White Supremacists to describe any Black person who didn't act as "expected."
webmaster, web master	web product owner	Historically, masters enslaved people, didn't consider them human and didn't allow them to express free will, so this term should generally be avoided.
white hat hacker	ethical hacker	Assigns value connotations based on color (white = good), an act which is

Instead of	Consider using	Context
		subconsciously racialized.
white paper	position paper	Assigns value connotations based on color (white = good), an act which is subconsciously racialized.
white team	cyber exercise cell	Assigns value connotations based on color (white = good), an act which is subconsciously racialized.
whitebox	visible, clear box	Assigns value connotations based on color (white = good), an act which is subconsciously racialized.
whitelist	allowlist	Assigns value connotations based on color (white = good), an act which is subconsciously racialized.
whitespace	empty space	Assigns value connotations based on color (white = good), an act which is subconsciously racialized.
yellow team	DevSecOps team	"Yellow" is often used disparagingly against people of Asian descent.

Person-First

The use of person-first language helps everyone to resist defining others by a single characteristic or experience if that person doesn't wish to be defined that way. Some people may not mind having the term(s) applied to them or may even prefer having them used. It's always preferable to ask a person how they want to be addressed instead of making assumptions.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
convict	person who is/was incarcerated	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
disabled person	person with a disability	"Disabled person" implies that the disability defines a person, whereas "Person with a disability" gives the ownership of the disability to the person.
homeless person	person without housing	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
immigrant	person who has immigrated, non-citizen	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
prisoner	person who is/was incarcerated	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.
prostitute (n)	person who engages in sex work	Using person-first language helps to not define people by just one of their characteristics.

Violent

Violent language is often used casually and without ill intent. It often involves imagery that may be upsetting to the recipient of such language though. We recommend using non-violent alternatives whenever possible.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
abusive relationship	relationship with an abusive person	The relationship doesn't commit abuse. A person does, so it is important to make that fact clear.
beat(ing) a dead horse	refus(e/ing) to let something go	This expression normalizes violence against animals.
crack the whip	double down, work hard(er), come down hard	Unnecessary use of violent imagery that paints the person being referred to as authoritarian or oppressive.
go off the reservation	disagree with the group, defect from the group, go rogue, not think or function properly	This phrase is rooted in the violent removal of Indigenous people from their land and the horrible consequences for an Indigenous person who left the reservation. This phrase could also fit under the Cultural Appropriation category.
kill(ing) two birds with one stone	accomplish(ing) two things at once	This expression normalizes violence against animals.
killing it, killed it	doing a great job, did a great job	Doing a good job should not be equated with death. The term could also be triggering if someone close to the recipient actually was killed.
more than one way to skin a cat	multiple ways to accomplish the task	This expression normalizes violence against animals.
pull the trigger	give it a go, try	Unnecessarily uses violent imagery to encourage another person to do something.
rule of thumb	standard rule, general rule	Although no written record exists today, this phrase is attributed to an old British law that allowed men to beat their wives with sticks no wider than their thumb.
take a shot at, take your best shot at, take a stab at	give it a go, try	These terms represent the unnecessary use of the imagery of hurting someone or something.
trigger warning	content note	The phrase can cause stress about what's to follow. Additionally, one can never know what may or may not trigger a particular person.
war room	situation room	Unnecessary use of violent language.
whipped into shape	organized, put in order	The phrase has its roots in the punishment of enslaved people to get them to follow the rules.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
wife beater (t-shirt)	white ribbed tank top, tank, undershirt	This phrase trivializes domestic violence by associating it with a piece of clothing.

Additional Considerations

These are terms that don't fit into the other categories but still are important enough to have attention drawn to them.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
African-American	Black	Black people who were born in the United States can interpret hyphenating their identity as "othering." As with many of the terms we're highlighting, some people do prefer to use/be addressed by this term, so it's best to ask a person which term they prefer to have used when addressing them. When used to refer to a person, the "b" should always be capitalized.
circle the wagons	marshall forces, gather together	This phrase suggests an impending attack by the "savages" and should be avoided.
gip (n)	Romani (if referring to a person of Romani descent) or cheat (if referring to someone who is dishonest)	This term is derived from "gypsy" and relates to the stereotype that Romani people are swindlers.
gip (v)	cheat (if referring to what a dishonest person has done)	This term is derived from "gypsy" and relates to the stereotype that Romani people are swindlers.
gyp (v), gyped (v)	to cheat (someone out of something), cheated/ripped off	These terms are derived from "gypsy" and relate to the stereotype that Romani people are swindlers.
hick	uneducated or unsophisticated person	This term assumes that those who come from rural environments are uneducated and/or unsophisticated.
hillbilly	person from the Appalachian or Ozark regions of the US	This is a derogatory term for someone based on the region in which they live or were born.
hip-hip hooray, hip hip hooray	hooray	This term was used by German citizens during the Holocaust as a rallying cry when they would hunt down Jewish citizens living in segregated neighborhoods.
hold down the fort	cover the role	This phrase stems from settlers and soldiers resisting "savages" when "on the warpath."
Jewed	haggled down	This term is based on a stereotype that people of Jewish descent are cheap and/or hoard money.
long time no see	I haven't seen you in so long!	This phrase was originally used to mock Indigenous peoples and Chinese who spoke pidgin English.

Instead of	Consider using	Context
no can do	I can't do it	Originated from stereotypes that mocked non-native English speakers.
normal person	ordinary person, common person, conventional person	This phrase results in the "othering" of non-White people and those who live with disabilities, mental illness or disease as not being whole or regular.
prostitute (v)	debase	Unnecessarily correlates corrupt or unworthy purposes with sex work.
submit	process	Depending on the context, the term can imply allowing others to have power over you.

Do you have a term you'd like added to the list? Please fill out [our suggestion form](#). Your suggestion will be reviewed and added to the list accordingly. If you don't have a SUNetID to access the suggestions form or if you have other suggestions, please [contact us](#).

* We understand that it may not be possible to eliminate all harmful language on our sites and in our code due to costs, resources, or other reasons. "Eliminate" is a goal to strive for even if it can't be achieved.

** How a person wishes to be addressed or identified supersedes any of our suggested alternatives for potentially harmful terms. If you are unsure in a given situation, ask the person with whom you are interacting.

*** These are a list of our sources:

- Brandeis Suggested Language List
- Terminology at XSEDE
- Trans Glossary 101
- The Colors of Cybersecurity
- Offensive/Profane Word List
- List of ethnic slurs (Wikipedia)
- Inclusive Language Guide

GUIDES

Getting Started Guide for IT Leaders

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IT at Stanford Slack Workspace

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