Modernizing Language
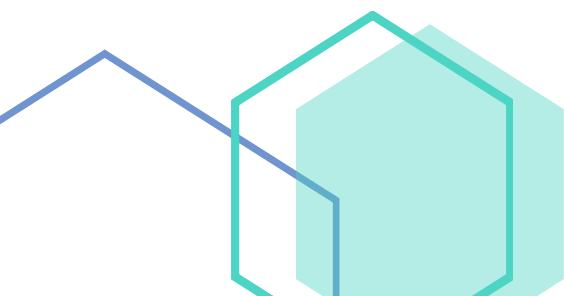
A reference guide for updating B.C. government policies and products

October 2023

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Introduction

Background

The Government of British Columbia (B.C.) is committed to modern, equitable and inclusive legislation, policies and service delivery. As part of that commitment, it is important to ensure that language used in government products is accessible, up-to-date and reflective of all people in the province. This resource was collaboratively developed with equity, inclusion, privacy, legal and accessibility teams from across government to help B.C. public servants identify and address outdated language and requirements within legislation, policies, forms and all other public-facing materials.

This guidance reflects current language standards used by the Office of Legislative Counsel when drafting legislation. It was designed to complement the B.C. Public Service's Words Matter guide, the guidelines for the Report on Multiculturalism, and the Guidelines to the Gender and Sex Data Standard. In addition, writing in plain language is a best practice that is important for both accessibility and general clarity. Check out B.C.'s Plain Language Checklist and other Plain Language Tools for further guidance.

Language is always changing. As such, this will be a living resource as we learn more about appropriate and inclusive word use and terminology, the tips and suggestions will be updated to better reflect our understanding.

How to use this guide

This guide can be used to review and update your program area's policies and materials. Examples of outdated words or requirements are provided alongside guidance on how to update the language. Cross-government efforts are currently underway to formally modernize language across B.C.'s acts and regulations. To complement this work, all ministries are encouraged to update other materials for which they are responsible – from policies and web content to application forms and program guides.
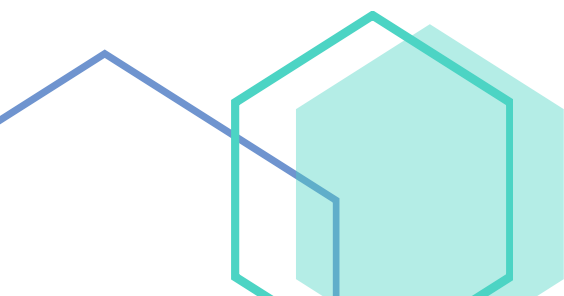
Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude for everyone who has contributed to this resource. Thank you for sharing your knowledge, experience and time. Suggestions for adding to or improving this resource? Need help? Contact us.

Gendered language

Using gender-neutral language is more accurate, respectful and inclusive. While current legislation and policies are generally drafted using a gender-neutral approach, gendered language still appears throughout B.C.'s acts, regulations, policies and forms. This section covers words to avoid and how to identify and update gendered language.

General tips

- Avoid using gendered language unless it is necessary to identify the sex or gender of the person for legal or medical purposes.
- Collect gender identity information only if your program area has the legal authority to collect, use, maintain and/or disclose this information and there is a specific purpose for doing so. Ensure you are following the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.
- Refrain from using binary language and pronouns that suggest only two sexes or genders exist, like "he or she," "himself or herself," and "female or male." Also avoid describing anything as "masculine" or "feminine" since these terms can perpetuate gender stereotypes.
- Review your program area's acts, regulations, policies, forms, web text and other internal and public-facing products to find examples of gendered language. When looking for gendered language, run searches on the commonly used gendered terms noted in the guide.
- Substitute gendered language with gender-neutral alternatives in acts and regulations. Contact the Better Regulations team for more information.
- For other policies, program materials, forms or websites, make changes through your ministry's individual amendment process or Government Communications and Public Engagement (GCPE) office depending on the type of document being updated.

▪ Ensure that the new wording is easy to understand and meets the original intent.

When you find an instance of gendered language, one or more of the following approaches can be used:

Substitute the gendered word with a gender-neutral synonym.

Replace the gendered word by **repeating** the earlier noun used.

Rephrase the sentence to eliminate the gendered word.

Use a **gender-neutral pronoun** if appropriate.

The remainder of this section will describe each of these methods with examples.

Please note that the lists below are not comprehensive. Should you come across gendered language that is not represented, please feel free to contact us with the terminology and suggested alternative.
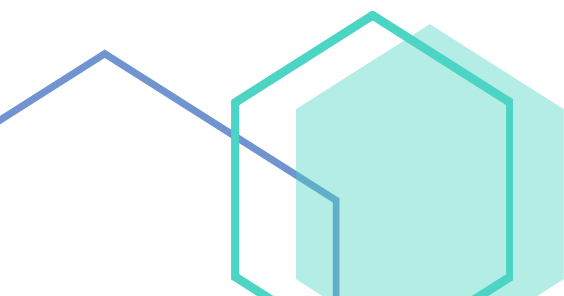
Substituting the word

Replacing the gendered word with a non-gendered synonym is often the most efficient way to address gendered language. Common examples of non-gendered alternatives can be found in the tables in the guide.

Gender refers to a person's internal and external experience of gender which may be the same or different from their sex at birth.

Sex refers to the external physical characteristics used to classify humans at birth.

Binary pronouns

Gender identity is non-binary. This means that there should be more than two options available to include those who do not identify as a man/male or a woman/female. Avoid using words that imply that only two genders exist. Phrases like "other gender," "opposite sex," and "both genders" should be updated to more inclusive alternatives.
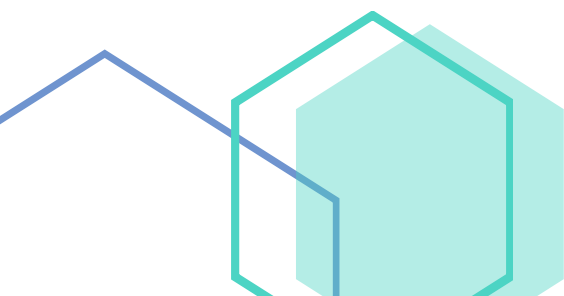
Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Binary options in forms and policies: Female/Male or F/M *The default should be to not collect gender or sex information – consider whether it is essential or can be left off.	**Provide at least three options/categories:** - Female (or: Woman, Girl, or F) - Male (or: Man, Boy, or M) - Non-binary or X - If possible: Prefer not to answer and/or Prefer to self describe (with an open field)
Both, opposite, same or other sex or gender	All/Any/Another sex(es) or gender(s)
Boy or girl/boys and girls	Child/Children
Man or woman/men and women	Adult(s)/Person/People (or omit)
Ladies and gentlemen	Everyone; or substitute with "Assembled Guests," "Colleagues," or "Folks"

Family

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Aunt/Uncle	Parent's sibling or their spouse
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	Partner/Significant other
Brother/Sister	Sibling
Daughter/Son	Child
Father/Mother	Parent
Granddaughter/Grandson	Grandchild
Grandfather/Grandmother	Grandparent
Husband/Wife	Spouse
Niece/Nephew	Child of a sibling/Sibling's child
Fraternal/Maternal	Ancestral/Parental

Occupations

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Actress/Poetess	Actor/Poet/Performer
Anchorman/Newsman	Anchor/Commentator/Newscaster/Reporter/Journalist
Baggageman	Baggage carrier/Porter
Barman	Bartender
Brakeman	Brake operator
Businessman	Businessperson
Cameraman	Camera operator/Cinematographer
Chairman	Chair/Chairperson
Clergyman	Clergy
Councilman/Alderman	Council member/Councillor
Craftsman/Craftsmanship	Craftsperson/Artisan/Artisanship
Crewman	Crew/Crew member
Doorman	Door attendant
Draftsman	Drafter
Fireman	Firefighter
Fisherman	Fisher
Flagman	Flagger/Flag person
Foreman	Foreperson/Site Manager
Freshman	First-year student

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Hostess/Waitress/Stewardess	Host/Server/Flight attendant
Maid/Housemaid/Chambermaid	Cleaner
Mailman/Postman	Mail carrier/Postal worker
Marksman	Shooter/sharpshooter
Middleman	Intermediary
Ombudsman	Ombudsperson/Ombuds/Ombud
Patrolman	Patrol officer/person
Policeman	Police officer
Repairman/Handyman/Serviceman	Repair person/Service member/Technician
Seaman	Sailor
Salesman	Salesperson/Sales representative/Salesclerk
Spokesman	Spokesperson/Representative
Statesman	Political leader/Public official/Diplomat
Tradesman/Journeyman	Tradesperson/Journeyperson
Watchman	Watchperson/Guard/Security guard/person
Workman	Worker

Other

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Bachelor/Bachelorette	Single person/Unmarried person
Grandfather(ing)	Legacy/Heritage

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Layman	Layperson
Man (verb)/Manned/ Unmanned	Operate/ Operated/ Crewed or Uncrewed/Autonomous
Man-hours/Man-power	Labour hours/Workforce/Human power or effort
Mankind/Man-kind	Humankind/Humanity
Manmade/Man-made	Human-made/Artificial

There are some terms that do not currently have a commonly accepted substitute, such as landlord, fraternal/fraternity and manslaughter. The Office of Legislative Counsel is currently considering these instances from a legal perspective. In the meantime, try to avoid using them if you can. Alternative wording such as "property owner" for landlord may be appropriate for non-legal materials. Contact us to discuss more challenging instances.

Something else to be aware of is gendered clothing requirements in legislation and policies – while contexts vary, ministries are encouraged to review instances where clothing types are prescribed to evaluate whether they are gender neutral and culturally inclusive.

The **Canadian Coast Guard** has moved towards gender-neutral uniform requirements and sizing, as well as inclusion of culturally appropriate elements such as hijabs and turbans.

Repeating the noun

When amending legislation in particular, gendered pronouns are typically addressed by repeating the noun instead. Use a gender-neutral, plain-language approach when updating policies and other materials.

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
"Each student will be called in alphabetical order to be determined by the first letter of his or her last name."	"Each student will be called in alphabetical order to be determined by the first letter of the student's last name."
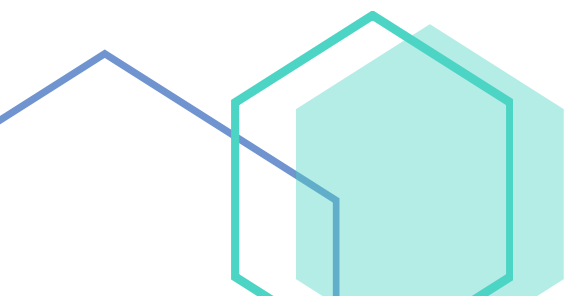
Rephrasing the sentence

While rephrasing the sentence can sometimes be more challenging, it can occasionally be the best option to ensure both clarity and original intent of the writing. This is particularly the case when binary pronouns are used such as he/she and his/her.

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
"All managers and employees involved in the sale and service of liquor at Crown ABC events must ensure that he or she is up to date on his or her Serving it Right certification and must have the printed certificate on his or her person at all times while he or she is working."	"All managers and employees involved in the sale and service of liquor at Crown ABC events must have a current Serving it Right certification and must carry their own printed certificate at all times while working."

Using a gender-neutral pronoun

In many cases, replacing a gendered pronoun with a gender-neutral pronoun like "they," "their," "them," and "themselves" is a useful approach. They/their can be used both as a singular and a plural pronoun, depending on the context.

Gendered word or phrase	Suggested alternative
"Each student will be called in alphabetical order to be determined by the first letter of his or her last name."	"Each student will be called in alphabetical order to be determined by the first letter of their last name."

Note: This approach may work well for policies, program materials and communications for government. In legislative drafting, or if the use of a gender-neutral pronoun could result in ambiguity, it may be more appropriate to use other techniques such as repeating the noun, using a synonym or rewriting the phrase.
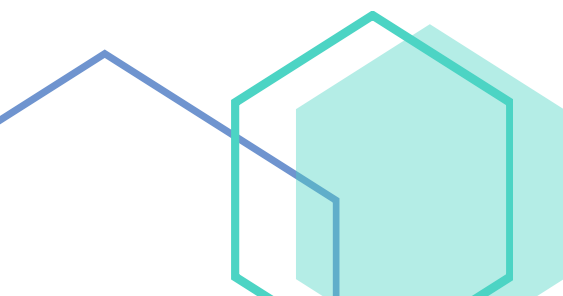
Accessibility and inclusion

B.C.'s commitment to using people-first language reinforces a basic principle that people are not defined by one characteristic such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or mental or physical ability. "Disability" can be defined in different ways. The medical model defines disability as the result of a medical condition while within the social model, "disability" means an inability to participate fully and equally in society. In either case, people-first language demonstrates respect for a person's dignity and individuality as it describes the person as who they are first, rather than first emphasizing a condition affecting the individual. Using the terminology of "person with a disability" is more respectful than referring to someone as a "disabled person" as it emphasizes that the person is an individual first and that they also happen to live with a disability.

> When drafting or amending non-legislative instruments, the first question to ask is if any personal identity descriptors are necessary to include for legal or interpretive reasons – if not, leave them out. Please refer to **Sections 26 and 27 of B.C.'s Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act** that specifies how and when personal

While people-first language can be helpful when designing formal policy or legislation, keep in mind that when writing for accessibility and inclusion that people and groups may have differing perspectives about what references are appropriate or preferred. Also be aware that official language conventions can sometimes be at odds with preferred language. For example, while "people with autism" is generally accepted in professional and government contexts as promoting people-first language, some prefer instead to self-identify as an "autistic person." In addition, the word "deaf" refers to a medical condition where an individual has little or no functional hearing while "Deaf" refers to those who are medically deaf or hard of hearing who identify with and participate in the culture, society, and language of Deaf people. Consulting with self-identifying communities and individuals is always a good idea to determine preferred language when describing characteristics, identities, traits or abilities.

The following (non-exhaustive) list provides some outdated language to be aware of, with the understanding that some terms have meaning in specific contexts and accepted/common usage shifts continually.

Contact the **Accessibility Directorate** for more support and connection to relevant communities.

Ability

Outdated word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Afflicted with/Suffers from X	Person with X
Handicapped/Disabled person	Person with a disability/Person(s) living with physical or mental disabilities
Handicapped parking/washroom	Accessible parking/washroom
Mentally challenged	Person with an intellectual/develop-mental disability
Physically challenged/Crippled	Person with a mobility disability/Person with a spinal cord injury
Wheelchair-user/Wheelchair-bound	Uses a wheelchair

Substance use

| Outdated word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Addict	Person with drug/alcohol depen-dence/Person with substance use disorder/Person living with addiction
Drug abuser/abuser or substance abuse/abuser	Drug or substance user/Person who uses drugs, alcohol, substances, etc.
Former addict/Clean/Sober	Person in recovery/Person in long-term recovery/Not currently using substances

Other terms

Outdated word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Elderly or senior	Older adult/person
Homeless person	Person experiencing homeless-ness/Person who is unhoused
Sexual preference	Sexual orientation
Victim	Survivor

If you have come across other terms within B.C. government materials that should be added to this list, please contact us.
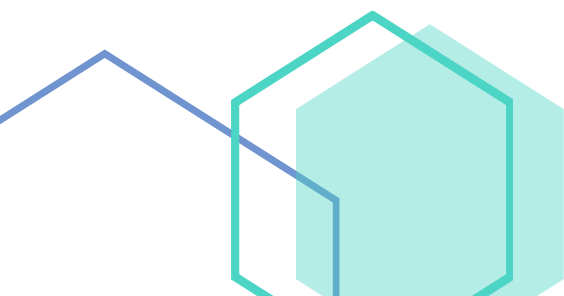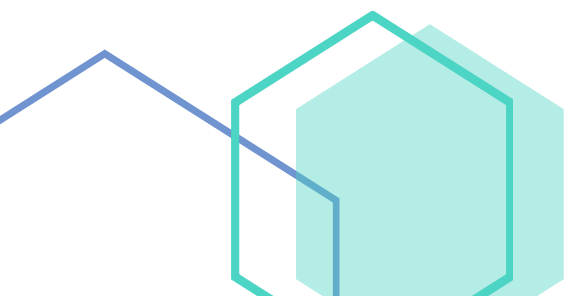
Culture and ethnicity

Words matter when it comes to promoting inclusion and eliminating discrimination. As with gendered language, consider first whether words related to a person or community's culture, ethnicity or country of origin are directly relevant.

Race is a social construct that is not universal. This means that society forms ideas of race based on geographic, historical, political, economic, social and cultural factors, as well as physical traits. Language that groups or classifies based on implied shared race characteristics is strongly discouraged as it can perpetuate stereotypes.

Ethnicity refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs. Be careful not to impose labels on ethnic groups. For example, Hispanic or Latino refer to people whose Spanish ancestors settled in Central and South America and in the Caribbean, and who follow the customs and cultures of these areas including speaking Spanish. However, the phrase Hispanic or Latino excludes Indigenous peoples and other non-Spanish people born in Brazil, French Guyana, Guyana, Surinam, and other non-Spanish speaking territories who have varying backgrounds, languages, customs, and beliefs.

To refer to racial and ethnic groups collectively, use terms such as People of Colour or underrepresented groups. Whenever possible, be aware of and use the preferred term(s) by the group or individual. In general, naming a nation or region is preferred. For example, instead of categorizing communities as Asian Canadian, you could use more specific labels that identify a country of origin, such as Japanese Canadian. By specifying region or nation of origin, when possible, it avoids the impression that all people have the same cultural background, religion or family history. Be sure to capitalize the names of nationalities, peoples and culture (e.g., "the authors were all Cantonese-speaking people of Chinese descent who have settled in B.C. for over 200 years").

Do not use language that implies that members of ethnic groups are underprivileged or have less money, education, or resources. Whenever possible,

use more specific terms to refer to discrimination or systemic issues (e.g., "schools in large urban areas with newcomer populations from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh have access to fewer opportunities").

The following are examples of alternative words or phrases:

Outdated word or phrase	Suggested alternative
Asian	Asian Canadian or be more specific by providing nation and region of origin (South Asia: Indian, Pakistani, Afghan, Bangladeshi and Nepali; Southeast Asia: Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai, Filipino, Indonesian; East Asia: Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese)
Caucasian	White peoples, European Canadians or be more specific by providing the nation of origin (e.g., Southern European, or Italian)
Foreigners	International people
Tolerance	Acceptance
Visible Minority or Minorities	People of Colour, underrepresented groups, or racialized communities

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Peoples is commonly used as a collective term for all the original peoples of Canada and their descendants and should be used instead of "Aboriginal," "Indian" or "Native." Keep in mind that while some groups and individuals use a mix of these terms, in official government materials, "Indigenous" should be used. Also note that some pieces of legislation and policy have not been updated, such as the federal *Indian Act* or other provincial and federal policies or programs with Aboriginal in their titles. When referring to the official titles of legislation or policy, use the correct title regardless of whether it is outdated to reduce confusion.

> B.C. has recently published a **Writing Guide for Indigenous Content.** Please use this resource when reviewing and writing materials.

"Indigenous people" with a lower case "people" refers to more than one Indigenous person rather than the collective group of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous should always be capitalized, as should formal titles like Chief or Elder when they are part of a person's title.

Be sure to use a **distinctions-based approach** in language concerning Indigenous peoples. This approach recognizes that there are three federally recognized Indigenous groups in Canada: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, with unique rights, interests and circumstances. This is also true of the various Nations and urban/rural Indigenous peoples – keep in mind the language conventions and preferences of the various groups to whom the policy or program may apply, and seek clarity if you are not sure.

When referring to a specific group that identifies as First Nations, Inuit or Métis, spell out naming conventions in full (e.g., Nisga'a Nation, McLeod Lake Indian Band or Westbank First Nation), and note instances where groups have dispensed with the use of the term "First" (e.g., Kwakiutl Nation instead of Kwakiutl First Nation).

Modernizing policy

It is good practice to regularly review the legislation, policies, forms and communications materials that your ministry is responsible for to ensure the language and requirements are modern and streamlined.

Legislative and regulatory changes

For inspiration, review the list of previous amendments through the Better Regulations for British Columbians (BR4BC) amendment process to see if similar changes could be made to your ministry's legislation. Types of amendments include:

- Repealing regulations or policies that are no longer needed or useful
- Updating names of referenced acts, regulations, authorities, departments and/or other names when/as they change
- Updating contact information
- Specifying products, such as forms or standards, to be determined by the director responsible for them to reduce the need for future amendments each time a product changes
- Eliminating duplicative steps or processes that are not needed
- Referring to benchmarks, standards, official websites or policies instead of embedding them in the regulation itself
- Updating requirements or resources to include digital options and sources

Contact the Better Regulations team to learn more about BR4BC.

Outdated technologies and processes

Government processes should be updated as new technology and service standards are adopted. Consider reviewing the following examples to determine if they are still relevant and necessary for British Columbians to meet requirements or access services, including for those in rural or remote areas or older populations:

- Facsimile/fax
- Newspaper
- Telegram
- Printed/print copy/paper-based
- In-person requirements
- Requirements to post notices in print newspapers/radio ads
- Providing multiple copies of documents
- "Wet" signatures and hard-copy forms (vs. digital)

Recent amendments made to the **Wills, Estates and Succession Act** now enable courts to accept electronically signed wills and allow for the remote witnessing of wills.