

## Eastern Mennonite University Policy on Inclusive, Community-Creating Language

### Preamble:

**Language use is a social practice that can include or exclude people.** At EMU, we recognize that all human beings are persons of infinite worth created equally in the image of God. Accordingly, we recognize that the language we use to speak about each other is no negligible matter but one of crucial importance. The words by which we name and address each other are used to recognize each other mutually and to empower each other to live out our potential.

### Policy:

Eastern Mennonite University expects all its faculty, staff, and students to adopt inclusive written and spoken language that welcomes everyone regardless of race or ethnicity, gender, disabilities, age, and sexual orientation. We will use respectful and welcoming language in all our official departmental documents and correspondence, including those put forth by way of Internet communication, and throughout all academic coursework, inclusive of classroom presentations and conversations, course syllabi, and both written and oral student assessment materials.

### *Considerations:*

- This policy does not attempt to cover all social practices that can create openness and hospitality or alienation and closing off of community. The focus of the policy is on language use within the EMU community of teaching, classroom discussions, research design and worship.
- This policy does not apply to personal conversations, although we encourage attentiveness to inclusive language use there as well.
- This policy does attempt to demonstrate current best academic practices; we recognize that acceptable academic language, living and continuously changing, includes some practices (e. g., the use of professional titles) that are locally contested. For examples, see the Best Practices for Inclusive Language in the Faculty Procedures for specific ways to utilize this policy.
- Language should emphasize the agency of those who are being discussed. Even prior to writing, academic research needs to include reliable and valid data and the voices and perspectives of the groups or individuals under consideration. Best academic practices are defined as ones that include diverse individuals and groups, enabling us to see people as full humans without drawing attention to irrelevant or stereotypical differences.

Responsible party: Provost's Council  
To be reviewed on three-year cycle

## **Best Practices for Inclusive Language**

We are called to be aware of our own social locations and what they enable us to see—but also what we are likely to miss. Language usage outside of the academy may vary, as may usage according to whether the arena is public or private, formal or informal. The examples below assume the use of English.

- 1. Try to keep a person's full identity as a human being in the forefront, rather than reducing an individual to one characteristic or part of that person's identity.**

Avoid redundant or irrelevant use of gendered, or racial or other referents. For example, speak of *persons with disabilities* rather than *disabled persons* or *the disabled*. Speak of *undocumented persons* rather than *illegal persons*. Avoid labeling a person with an illness or a mental illness. A person is not an illness. Speak to the person first, and then the illness. For example, speak of *persons with mentally ill experiences or challenges or diagnosis*; not a *bipolar person*, but *persons living with bipolar disorder*; not *drug/alcohol abusers* but *persons with substance use challenges*; not a *diabetic* but *persons with diabetes*

- 2. Draw attention to a person's gender, race, occupation, age, sexual orientation or other identifying characteristic only if it is relevant to the situation at hand.**

Typically discussion of an individual's physical characteristics tends to reinforce stereotypes or turn groups into sexualized beings rather than fully human persons. For example, avoid emphasizing women's physical features or reproductive capacities outside of relevant contexts. Do not assume that women function primarily as caregivers (or that men do not). In all cases, ask: Are the characteristics described truly relevant to the situation under discussion?

- 3. Use the terms that those you are discussing will use to describe themselves to others, recognizing that such terms may change over time.**

For example, use *Inuit* rather than *Eskimo*. However, be aware of euphemistic language that individuals and groups use to hide realities. For instance, use *genocide* rather than *ethnic cleansing*.

- 4. Use symmetry when discussing pairs of groups.**

For example, when referring to adult humans, use *women and men* rather than *girls and men* (This example is given to show how women are often described in language that confers childlike, rather than adult characteristics. However, this example also assumes binary gender characteristics and therefore *human* is preferred to *women and men*). Use *Ms. Janet Chao and Mr. Thomas Jones*, or *Chao and Jones*, not *Janet and Jones*.

- 5. Avoid assuming that men are the norm or standard, and others are exceptions.**

Typically, use *humankind* rather than *mankind*, *human* rather than *man*, and *artificial* or *unnatural* rather than *manmade*. Use *chairperson* rather than *chairman*, *First-year student* rather than *freshman*. Take note of when and how statistics and standards were created. For example, height and weight charts used to measure obesity are often based on an average of men taken in the 1950s. Is it then fair to measure women as obese or overweight using these measures?

**6. Avoid assuming that white people are the norm or standard, and others are exceptions.**

For example, be aware of terms like *real Americans* or the use of *we*, *us* and *our* when only white people are meant.

**7. Use gender-neutral pronouns**

Gender-neutral pronouns (*s/he*, *her/him*, *zie*, *hir*) are preferred to *he* when talking about a group of people that includes men, women and non-gender-identifying persons. Often using a plural rather than a singular sentence construction will enable a smoother read. Use plural gender-neutral pronouns (*they*, *them*, *their*) instead of singular forms to avoid awkward constructions.

**8. Does the language used retain agency for the persons you are talking about?**

*Survivors* is preferred to *victims*. Use “uses a wheelchair” rather than “is confined to a wheelchair” and only if wheelchair use is relevant to the topic.

**9. Use titles, or not, based on the culture of the society in which a person is living or visiting.**

Formal titles may be proper in a society or setting that is more structured, and titles may be viewed as unnecessary in a society that is less formal.

“Communicate across cultures: Recognize what you consider ‘normal.’ Examine your own customary behaviors and assumptions, and think about how they may affect what you think and say (and write). Listen closely to someone from another culture, and ask for clarification if necessary. Carefully define your terms. Think about your audience’s expectations. How much authority should you have? What kind of evidence will count most with your audience? Organize your writing with your audience’s expectations in mind. If in doubt, use formal style” (Lunsford, *TEW*, 2017,

p. 276).\*

“Consider other kinds of difference: Age, Class, Geographical area, Physical ability or health, Religion, and Sexual orientation” (see Lunsford, *TEW*, 2017, pp 284-285 for explanations).\* Refer to the “Language” section of *The Everyday Writer* (EMU’s writing handbook) for additional discussion.

**10. Use materials from groups who experience marginalization...**

...in teaching, classroom discussions, research design and worship.

Due to the rapidly changing nature of best practices, please contact the Provost’s Office with suggestions for revisions to this document.

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