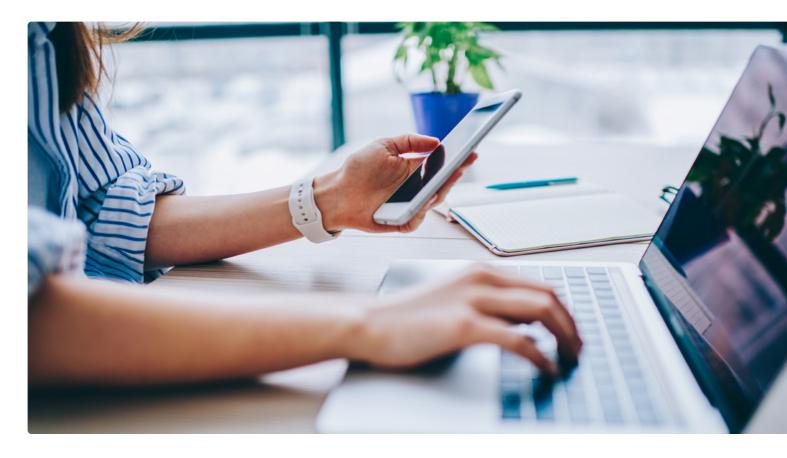# Racial Sensitivity Language Guide

Language is a powerful tool that we often take for granted.

It's all too common for individuals to use a term or a phrase without thinking deeply about the potential impact those words might have or how they originated. But as we take action against systemic racism, it's time to examine our choice of written and spoken words, especially as it applies to the workplace.

In order to truly eliminate racism from the workplace, it's important to educate your workforce on the racially insensitive phrases that may be used in casual discussions. Your organization should also audit workplace policies, manuals, written processes or any publicly facing content and change any potentially offensive language that may have been used in the past.

That's not to say that the topic of racial or ethnic identity cannot be discussed. For example, issues like social determinants of health require racial identifiers to understand these health disparities. When the need to address race or ethnicity arises, it is best practice to avoid terms like "minority," "colored people" and "non-White." Instead, acknowledge racial and ethnic groups as proper nouns and avoid terms or notions that preserve race-based stereotypes.[1]

Removing racially insensitive language from your vocabulary—both in the past and moving forward—is the first step to becoming a more inclusive workplace. We've put together a list of common words and phrases, along with some suggestions and background, to raise awareness for the everyday language that may be used in conversation or in writing.

OFFENSIVE WORD	ALTERNATE WORD	CONTEXT
Blacklist/Whitelist	**Block List, Exclude/Safe List, Allow List, Include**	Anything that denotes white as "good" or "superior" and black as "bad" or "inferior" (including phrases like black mark or blackball) should be avoided.[2]
Master/Slave	**Primary/replica**	Often used to describe components of software & hardware in which one process/device controls another.[2]
	Master: Main, primary	**Master:** Commonly used in reference to a "master file," or to describe acquiring a skill ("master the art of").
	Slave: Devoted or dedicated to, struggle or burdened with, weighed down by	**Slave:** May be used in the context of "being a slave" to something.
Cakewalk	**Easy, walk in the park, straightforward, simple**	The term cakewalk refers to a performance or dance performed by enslaved Black people on plantations prior to the Civil War in which they competed for a piece of cake.[2]
Urban or Inner City	**Metropolitan population, low-income, high-need**	Using terms like "urban population" or "inner city population" may be offensive.[3]
Grandfathered in	**Old rule, inherited, legacy**	The term "Grandfather clause" was associated with efforts to exclude Black Americans from voting after the 15th amendment was passed.[2]
Tipping point	**Boiling point, reached the limit**	"Tipping point" was a phrase used in the '50s and '60s to describe white families moving out of a neighborhood due to an influx of Black Americans.[3]
Ethnic minority	**Minority ethnic group**	'Ethnic minority' places the emphasis on ethnicity as the main issue.[4]

OFFENSIVE WORD	ALTERNATE WORD	CONTEXT
Uppity	**Overbearing, arrogant, pretentious**	The word uppity was first used by Southerners in reference to Black people "who didn't know their place."[5]
Peanut gallery	**Audience, commentators**	Originally, this term referred to the areas in segregated theaters where Black people were forced to sit.[5]

It's all too common for individuals to use a term or a phrase without thinking deeply about the potential impact those words might have or how they originated. But as we take action against systemic racism, it's time to examine our choice of written and spoken words, especially as it applies to the workplace.

Sources:

https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities 1

https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/06/us/racism-words-phrases-slavery-trnd/index.html 2

https://www.prdaily.com/5-racially-offensive-phrases-pr-pros-must-delete-from-their-vocabulary/ 3

https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/equality/?page_id=130 4

https://www.businessinsider.com/offensive-phrases-that-people-still-use-2013-11 5

CHANGING
LIVES *And* BUSINESSES
FOR GOOD

Ready to take your employee wellbeing program to the next level? Talk to an expert at Virgin Pulse to get started.

Learn more at virginpulse.com
Find us on facebook | twitter | linkedin