
INCITS INCLUSIVE TERMINOLOGY GUIDELINES

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Where IT all begins

*InterNational Committee for
Information Technology Standards*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Scope

Terminology in INCITS documents should be clear and unambiguous, conveying only the intended meaning to all readers. This document provides guidance in writing documents that are clear and inclusive, by avoiding terms with negative connotations.

1.2. Purpose

Some terms have negative connotations which may be offensive to, alienate, or exclude some readers, even if no harm was intended. A term may have different meanings to different people based on their experiences and identities. Some terms are offensive and promote bias or stereotypes regarding gender, age, ability, nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc.

Some terms have multiple meanings, and sometimes the negative connotations are not associated with all of the meanings. Such terms should be avoided unless the use is clearly linked to the less problematic meanings.

In accordance with the INCITS Code of Conduct and the INCITS Principle of Inclusive Terminology, INCITS documents are expected to be inclusive and avoid terms with negative connotations.

Whenever possible, inclusive terminology shall be used to describe technical capabilities and relationships. Insensitive, archaic and non-inclusive terms shall be avoided. For the purpose of this Principle, “inclusive terminology” means terminology perceived or likely to be perceived as neutral or welcoming by everyone, regardless of their sex, gender, race, color, religion, etc.

New specifications, standards, documentation and other collateral shall be developed using inclusive terminology. As feasible, existing and legacy specifications and documentation shall be updated to identify and replace non-inclusive terms with alternatives more descriptive and tailored to the technical capability or relationship.

INCITS Principle of Inclusive Terminology

This document provides guidance which can be used to assist in the selection and use of appropriate terms when avoiding terms with negative connotations in new text and migrating away from terms with negative connotations in existing text. This document solely concerns inclusivity; it does not cover terminology that is problematic for reasons other than inclusivity.

1.3. Audience

This document is intended primarily for authors and editors of INCITS documents, but is applicable for all participants in INCITS.

1.4. Intent

The intent of this document is to reflect INCITS' understanding at the time of publication of the best practices for inclusive terminology and the preferences of different communities and stakeholders. This is an evolving field, and as such, this is intended to be a living document. Feedback or suggested improvements to this document are welcome, and can be sent to inclusive@standards.incits.org.

2. Normative References

[INCITS Code of Conduct](#)

[INCITS Principle of Inclusive Terminology](#)

[ISO House Style Section on Inclusive Language](#)

[ISO 704 Principles of Terminology](#)

3. Definitions

3.1.

term, n.

word or phrase that has a denotative meaning and might also have connotative meanings

3.2.

denotation, n.

denotative, adj.

intended or primary meaning of a term

3.3.

connotation,

n. connotative, adj.

meanings, ideas, feelings, imagery, emotions, or images inferred or invoked by a term in addition to the primary meaning of a term

3.4.

negative connotation, n.

defamatory, derogatory, exclusionary, or inaccurate meanings inferred or invoked by a term

3.5.

inclusive term, n.

term that avoids individuals' subjective experience of negative connotations and is perceived or likely to be perceived as neutral or welcoming by everyone, regardless of their sex, gender, race, color, religion, etc

3.6

term with negative connotations, n.

term that infers or invokes negative feelings, negative imagery, negative emotions, negative image, lack of belonging, or falsity

3.7**term of art, n.**

term with a precise and specialized meaning within a particular domain, field or profession

3.8**identity-first language, n.**

linguistic style that describes people in terms of their attributes or conditions

3.9**people-first language, n.**

linguistic style that avoids describing people in terms of their attributes or conditions

4. Negative Connotations

If some individuals subjectively experience negative connotations with a term, then it is not inclusive and should be replaced with an inclusive term. There does not need to be consensus that a term has negative connotations; instead, there should be consensus that a term does not have negative connotations.

A term with negative connotations can be used intentionally, accidentally (without the author's awareness), or via incorrect usage (e.g. used for one intention but results in another consequence). The author's intent or belief that the use of the term with negative connotations should be acceptable, or the length of time that the term with negative connotations has been used, is not sufficient to justify its use.

4.1. Figurative Language

Authors should recognize that using figurative language, such as the use of metaphors, can both be powerful (as it can quickly conjure the ideas intended), but can also have pitfalls (potential association now or in the future with negative connotations).

When using figurative language, authors should take care to research any negative connotations, including international, multilingual, and multicultural contexts as their work might progress towards international adoption.

4.2. Anthropomorphizing Language

In particular, figurative language which anthropomorphizes things (e.g. attributing human characteristics or behaviors to things) can often lead to unintentional negative connotations. Authors should avoid such language.

4.3. Identity-First and People-First Language

The way in which people with certain attributes or conditions are described can have negative connotations. Different communities have different terminology preferences.

Some communities prefer identity-first language, i.e. describing people by their attributes or conditions (e.g. "the blind", "the Deaf"). Some communities prefer people-first language, i.e. describe what a person has (e.g. "people with", "people who"), rather than asserting what a person is.

Authors should be conscious of and respect the preferences of different communities. Often, it is better to address needs and/or adaptations instead of talking about people (e.g. the need to understand dialogue nonverbally, or the use of captions to address that need).

4.4. Gendered Language

In English language documents, use of gendered language should be avoided when not necessary.

When referring to someone or something, avoid associating a particular gender if the person or thing does not have a gender, especially if the person or thing in question is non-specific abstract (e.g. "the user" should not be assumed to have a gender unless necessary).

When referring to a specific person or entity, use the preferred pronouns of the entity. Authors should seek to learn the preferred pronouns if they are unsure.

5. Identifying Terms with Negative Connotations

To determine if a term has negative connotations, authors should consider:

- What are the denotative meanings of a term?
- What possible connotations could that term have?
- Are any of those connotations negative to any audience?
- In what context are the term(s) used that indicate the negative connotation?
- Is it exact usage of said term(s) that evokes those connotations, or are there patterns of similar terms (e.g., plurals, conjugation)?
- Are there any exceptions where use of the term is acceptable?
- Will the term(s) have negative connotations when translated into other languages?
- Select recommended denotative replacements to avoid negative connotative uses.

Annex A of this document provides a non-comprehensive list of terms with negative connotations which describes the properties mentioned above for each term and suggests alternatives.

6. Migration from Terms with Negative Connotations

When a term with negative connotations appears in a published document, if it can be changed without any normative impact, it should be replaced.

If changing it would have a normative impact (e.g. a keyword or identifier in a programming language, a term used in a normative standard), or the term is a term of art, it may not be possible to avoid the term with negative connotations immediately. Instead, authors should:

- Identify existing usage of the term with negative connotations throughout the portfolio or product line.
- Minimize references to the term with negative connotations.
- Introduce aliases for the term with negative connotations and rewrite the document to primarily use the alias instead of the term with negative connotations.
- Consult with suppliers, stakeholders of interoperating products and standards to coordinate timely revisions.
- Initially focus on public-facing documents and higher priority products in revisions.

Sometimes, a term with a negative connotation is a term of art in widespread use outside a particular document. Simply changing the term in the document may reduce clarity and not reduce usage of the term.

When such a term is replaced, the historical term of art can be retained if necessary, with an explanation that the term has been deprecated and a reference to the new term. In these cases, it can help to identify the document with the primary definition of a term, and change the term there, and coordinate a consistent change across the field.

Annex A. Examples of Terms with Negative Connotations

This annex identifies a non-comprehensive list of commonly encountered terms with negative connotations at the time of the authoring of this document. It is not comprehensive and is likely to evolve with time.

Unless otherwise noted, the terms here are considered problematic in all parts of speech even when not exhaustively enumerated (e.g. as a noun, verb, adjective).

The terms listed here are only considered problematic in the specific negative contexts described in their entry. Usage of the terms outside of those negative contexts is acceptable.

CONTENT WARNING: The following list contains material that may be harmful or traumatizing to some audiences.

A.1. Race

white

Denotative Meaning: The color, including skin (when referring to skin color, should be capitalized).

Negative Connotations: Racial discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Use to denote either:

1. Goodness, virtue, or morality
2. Acceptance, permission, or authorization

including use independent of the term "black".

Alternatives: good, allowed, permitted, authorized.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
<p>whitelist A set of good or allowed people or things.</p>	<p>allowlist, accesslist, permitlist <i>Rewriting the text instead of directly replacing the term "whitelist" may make the text clearer (e.g. "the following are whitelisted" can be replaced with "the following are allowed").</i></p>
<p>white hat A computer security practitioner who defends computer systems.</p>	<p>defender, pen tester</p>
<p>white team A group of computer security practitioners who defend computer systems.</p>	<p>defending team, pen testers</p>

black

Denotative Meaning: The color, including skin (when referring to skin color, should be capitalized).

Negative Connotations: Racial discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Use to denote either:

1. Badness, evil, or immorality.
2. Rejection, lack of permission, or lack of authorization.

including use independent of the term "white".

Alternatives: bad, disallowed, rejected, unauthorized.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
<p>blacklist A set of bad or forbidden people or things.</p>	<p>blocklist, denylist, droplist <i>Rewriting the text instead of directly replacing the term "blacklist" may make the text clearer (e.g. "the following are blacklisted" can be replaced with "the following are blocked").</i></p>
<p>black hat A computer security practitioner who violates computer systems, possibly without authorization.</p>	<p>attacker, adversary, threat actor</p>

<p>black team A group of computer security practitioners who violate computer systems, possibly without authorization.</p>	<p>attacking team, adversarial team</p>
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dark pattern

Denotative Meaning: A user interface that has been designed to trick users.

Negative Connotations: Racial discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: deceptive pattern.

grandfather clause, grandfathered

Denotative Meaning: An exception that allows an old rule to be applied to existing cases after a new rule has been introduced.

Negative Connotations: Racial discrimination, ageist, unnecessarily gendered. This term was used to refer to laws passed in the Southern United States that limited the voting rights of formerly enslaved persons by prohibiting anyone from voting if their grandfather was not eligible to vote.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: legacy, historical.

first-class citizen

Denotative Meaning: Someone or something that is fundamental to a system and supports all basic operations.

Negative Connotations: Racial, political, and gender discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Use to denote a hierarchy.

Alternatives: first-class entity, core entity, top level entity.

Chinese wall

Denotative Meaning: An information barrier designed to prevent exchange of information or communication that could lead to conflicts of interest.

Negative Connotations: Racial discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: ethical wall.

A.2. Accessibility

disabled

Denotative Meaning: A condition that limits the capabilities of someone or something.

Negative Connotations: Perceptions that certain attributes and conditions are negatives.

Negative Contexts: Use that suggests certain attributes and conditions are a negative.

Alternatives:

1. *Identify and use the terms preferred by the specific community. Identify whether the specific community prefers identity-first or people-first language.*
2. *Prefer describing the need (e.g. something that cannot be seen), the adaptation (e.g. audio description), or the situation, preferably precisely (e.g. unable to discriminate color, with reduced vision).*

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
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the mentally disabled	people with developmental disorders, people who are neurodivergent, the neurodivergent
the visually disabled	the blind, people with low vision
people with visual disabilities	the blind, people with low vision
the hearing disabled	the Deaf, the Hard-of-Hearing
people with hearing disabilities	the Deaf, the Hard-of-Hearing

impaired

Denotative Meaning: A condition that limits the capabilities of someone or something.

Negative Connotations: Perceptions that certain attributes and conditions are negatives.

Negative Contexts: Use that suggests certain attributes and conditions are a negative.

Alternatives:

1. *Identify and use the terms preferred by the specific community. Identify whether the specific community prefers identity-first or people-first language.*
2. *Prefer describing the need (e.g. something that cannot be seen), the adaptation (e.g. audio description), or the situation, preferably precisely (e.g. unable to discriminate color, with reduced vision).*

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
the mentally impaired	people with developmental disorders, people who are neurodivergent, the neurodivergent
the visually impaired	the blind, people with low vision
people with visual impairments	the blind, people with low vision
the hearing impaired	the Deaf, the Hard-of-Hearing
people with hearing impairments	the Deaf, the Hard-of-Hearing

blind

Denotative Meaning: Unable to see.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of the blind.

Negative Contexts:

1. Use that suggests that being blind is a negative.
2. Use of people-first language to describe the blind.

3. Use to indicate a lack of perception or awareness.

Alternatives:

1. Use identity-first language, not people-first language.
2. Prefer describing the need (e.g. something that cannot be seen), the adaptation (e.g. audio description), or the situation, preferably precisely (e.g. unable to discriminate color, with reduced vision).
3. To denote lack of perception or awareness: unaware, covered, shuttered.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
people who are blind	the blind
people with blindness	the blind

deaf

Denotative Meaning: Unable to hear.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of the Deaf.

Negative Contexts:

1. Use that suggests that being Deaf is a negative.
2. Use of people-first language to describe the Deaf.
3. Use to indicate a lack of perception or awareness.
4. Use to indicate stubbornness.

Alternatives:

1. Use identity-first language, not people-first language.
2. Prefer describing the need (e.g. something that cannot be heard), the adaptation (e.g. text captions), or the situation, preferably precisely (e.g. unable to hear).
3. To denote lack of perception or awareness: unaware, covered, shuttered.
4. To denote stubbornness: stubborn.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
people who are deaf	the Deaf (<i>note capitalization</i>)
people with deafness	the Deaf (<i>note capitalization</i>)
the deaf	the Deaf (<i>note capitalization</i>)
deaf person	Deaf person (<i>note capitalization</i>)

dumb

Denotative Meaning: Unable to speak due to injury, disease, or disability.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of people unable to speak

Negative Contexts:

1. Use to define people by their attributes or condition.
2. Use to indicate a lack of intelligence.

Alternatives:

1. *To describe people or things with the condition:* mute.
2. *To denote a lack of intelligence:* unintelligent.

dummy

Denotative Meaning: A placeholder or mock.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of people with impairments or neurodivergence.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: placeholder, sample, pseudo-, scaffolding.

sanity

Denotative Meaning: The soundness or health of a person's mind.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of people with impairments or neurodivergence.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: coherence, confidence.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
<p>sanity check/test A basic test that determines if a system is functioning.</p>	<p>smoke check/test basic check/test coherence check/test confidence check/test</p>

crazy

Denotative Meaning: A lack of sanity.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of people with impairments or neurodivergence.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: unexpected, surprising, puzzling.

cripple

Denotative Meaning: A limitation or disadvantage.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of people with impairments, violence.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: limit, disadvantage.

handicap

Denotative Meaning:

1. A limitation or disadvantage that someone or something has.
2. Modifications made to a system aiming to make the system more fair to people or things that have some disadvantage.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of people with impairments.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: limit, disadvantage.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
the handicapped	people with disabilities

A.3. Gender & Sexuality

he/him/his, she/her/hers

Denotative Meaning: Personal gender

Negative Connotations: Unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts: Use in English language documents to refer to a person or thing that does not have a specific gender.

Alternatives:

1. *When referring to a specific person, use the pronouns that they prefer.*
2. *When referring to a non-specific or abstract person: they/them/their. Often the need for a pronoun can be avoided by using a noun or noun phrase (e.g. the user, the operator, the manufacturer).*
3. *When referring to a non-living thing without a specific gender: it/its.*

man, woman

Denotative Meaning: A person.

Negative Connotations: Unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts: Use in English language documents to refer to a person or thing that does not have a specific gender, including use in compound nouns or phrases.

Alternatives: person, human.

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
common man A typical person with no distinguishing or extraordinary attributes	average person, ordinary person
chairman Someone who presides over a meeting or organization.	chair, chairperson, moderator
draftsman Someone who makes detailed technical plans or drawings.	draftsperson
workmanship The skill or art of a worker.	skill, craft, artistry, handiwork, work, technique
man in the middle Illicit interception or modification of communications between two parties by an attacker.	person in the middle, attacker in the middle
mans, man a project To acquire or provide the personnel for a project.	staffs, staff a project, hire personnel, employ staff

<p>manpower A quantity of people or human effort.</p>	<p>staff, labour, workforce, personnel, workers, human resource</p>
<p>man hours/weeks/years Units which measure human effort.</p>	<p>people hours/weeks/years, work hours/weeks/years, engineer hours/weeks/years</p>
<p>manmade Made or caused by humans.</p>	<p>artificial, synthetic, manufactured, industrial, made by humans</p>
<p>men and women A group of people.</p>	<p>people, humanity, human beings, the public, society</p>
<p>unmanned Something that does not involve a human.</p>	<p>autonomous, remotely controlled, unstaffed</p>

male

Denotative Meaning: A gender or sex.

Negative Connotations: Sexual intercourse and unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts:

1. Use in English language documents to refer to a person or thing that does not have a specific gender.
2. Use to describe a non-living thing which is inserted into a counterpart (e.g. a connector or fastener).

Alternatives:

1. *For unnecessary gendering: Remove the adjective or use a different noun or noun phrase (e.g. the user, the operator, the manufacturer).*
2. *To refer to non-living things inserted into counterparts: convex, plug, pin, prong.*

female

Denotative Meaning: A gender or sex.

Negative Connotations: Sexual intercourse and unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts:

1. Use in English language documents to refer to a person or thing that does not have a specific gender.
2. Use to describe a non-living thing that can have a counterpart inserted into it (e.g. a connector or fastener).

Alternatives:

1. *For unnecessary gendering: Remove the adjective or use a different noun or noun phrase (e.g. the user, the operator, the manufacturer).*

2. *To refer to non-living things inserted that can have counterparts inserted:* concave, receptacle, socket, slot.

mate*Denotative Meaning:*

1. A friend, partner, or spouse.
2. To have sexual intercourse.
3. To join or connect together.

Negative Connotations: Sexual intercourse.

Negative Contexts: Use as a verb to describe the joining of non-living things (denotative meaning 3).

Alternatives: join, connect, pair.

mother tongue*Denotative Meaning:*

1. The first language which someone learned.
2. Great proficiency in a language.

Negative Connotations: Negative perceptions of multilingual people, unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives:

1. *To refer to the first language learned:* first language.
2. *To express great proficiency:* *Rephrase in terms of proficiency.*

A.4. Dominance

master*Denotative Meaning:*

1. Someone or something which controls or manages other people or things.
2. The authoritative or primary person or thing.
3. Gain proficiency in a skill.

Negative Connotations: Human slavery, racial discrimination, and unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts: Use to denote authority or control over other people or things (denotative meanings 1 and 2), including use independent of "slave".

Alternatives: main, primary, leader, active, writer, coordinator.

slave

Denotative Meaning: Someone or something which is controlled by someone or something else.

Negative Connotations: Human slavery and racial discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: follower, secondary, standby, replica, reader, worker, helper.

master/slave

Denotative Meaning: A relationship in which someone or something (the slave) is controlled by someone or something else (the master).

Negative Connotations: Human slavery, racial discrimination, and unnecessarily gendered.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: main/secondary, leader/follower, primary/secondary, primary/replica, active/standby, writer/reader, coordinator/worker.

colony

Denotative Meaning:

1. Someone or something under full or partial control of someone or something else.
2. A subgroup or collection of people or things.

Negative Connotations: Imperialism, racial and political discrimination.

Negative Contexts: Any use.

Alternatives: settlement, population, community, territory.

A.5. Violence & Bereavement

suicide

Denotative Meaning: To take one's own life.

Negative Connotations: Violence and self harm.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: shut down, self destruct.

murder

Denotative Meaning: To end someone's life intentionally.

Negative Connotations: Violence.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: halt, end, stop, eliminate, quit, close (*possibly with an enforcing or descriptive adverb, e.g. end involuntarily, hard stop, force quit*).

kill

Denotative Meaning: To end someone's life.

Negative Connotations: Violence.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: halt, end, stop, eliminate, quit, cease, close (*possibly with an enforcing or descriptive adverb, e.g. end involuntarily, hard stop, force quit*).

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
kill a child process	halt a child process, stop a child process

abort

Denotative Meaning: To end someone or something.

Negative Connotations: Bereavement, end of a pregnancy.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: halt, end, stop, eliminate, quit, cease, close (*possibly with an enforcing or descriptive adverb, e.g. end involuntarily, hard stop, force quit*).

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
abort a child process	halt a child process, stop a child process

terminate

Denotative Meaning: To end someone or something.

Negative Connotations: Bereavement, end of a pregnancy.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use with non-living or abstract things.

Alternatives: halt, end, stop, eliminate, quit, cease, close (*possibly with an enforcing or descriptive adverb, e.g. end involuntarily, hard stop, force quit*).

<i>Examples of Negative Contexts</i>	<i>Alternatives</i>
terminate a child process	halt a child process, stop a child process

hang

Denotative Meaning:

1. To suspend something.
2. To kill someone.

Negative Connotations: Violence.

Negative Contexts: Analogous use to describe something or someone that is non-responsive.

Alternatives: suspend, pause, freeze.