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Tips for More Inclusive Language

Words at work do more than carry information. They tell people whether they were imagined when the sentence was written — whether the team in the speaker's mind included them, or whether they are standing slightly outside the picture, translating themselves into it. Inclusive language is the practice of choosing words that let everyone into the picture: the new starter reading the handbook on their first morning, the customer reading your website, the colleague in the meeting deciding whether this is a place where they fully belong. It is not about policing speech or memorizing a list of forbidden words. It is about accuracy, respect, and the professional skill of saying what you actually mean to the whole of your actual audience.

This lesson set is for anyone who writes or speaks at work — which is everyone. It will help you if you write job adverts, emails, policies, or web pages; if you chair meetings or give presentations; if you manage people and set the tone of a team; or if you simply want to stop worrying that you will say the wrong thing and start knowing how to choose the right thing — and how to recover gracefully on the occasions when you get it wrong, as everyone occasionally does. The approach throughout is practical rather than anxious. Language changes over time, communities differ in what they prefer, and no list stays correct forever. What lasts is a way of thinking: prefer words that describe people accurately and neutrally, use the terms people use for themselves, avoid assumptions baked into phrases, and when in doubt, choose the wording that costs you nothing and includes the most people.

Why does this matter enough to study? Because exclusion by language is rarely dramatic. It is the job advert asking for a "young and dynamic" candidate that quietly tells a fifty-year-old expert not to apply. It is the form that offers "Mr" and "Mrs" and nothing else. It is the meeting where every example is a man, every spouse is a wife, every worker is a "he" — until half the room has done a hundred small acts of translation and absorbed a hundred small messages about who the default person is. Each instance is tiny. Their sum is a culture. And the reverse is also true: small, consistent, thoughtful word choices are one of the cheapest and most visible ways a workplace proves that "everyone is welcome here" is a fact and not a poster. By the end of this set you will be able to spot the common patterns, rewrite them with confidence, handle the main areas — disability, race, gender, age, faith, and family status — with accurate, current practice, correct yourself without drama when you slip, and update the documents and templates where your team's language lives longest.

What You Will Learn

- What inclusive language is and is not — and the simple thinking habits behind every specific rule.
- How to use person-first and identity-first language for disability, and how to talk about disability accurately and only when relevant.
- How to write and speak about race and ethnicity with accuracy, using the terms communities use for themselves.

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- How to remove needless gender from job language, documents, and everyday speech — and use names, roles, and pronouns correctly.
- How to avoid age assumptions in both directions, and write about experience without coded exclusions.
- How to write respectfully about faith, family status, and other differences, without assumptions built into the phrasing.
- How to correct yourself — and accept correction — gracefully, briefly, and without making it a bigger moment than it needs to be.
- How to audit and update team documents, templates, forms, and job adverts so inclusive language is built in, not remembered.

Lesson 1 — The Habits Behind the Words

Every specific example in this set grows from four habits. Learn the habits and you will be able to handle situations no list has covered, including the ones that arise next year when the language has moved on again — as it always does, because language belongs to the people it describes and they keep refining it.

The first habit is accuracy. Much exclusionary language is, before anything else, simply wrong. "The team and their wives" at a works event is inaccurate in any mixed workplace. A job advert seeking a "native English speaker" usually means fluent English to a professional standard — a different, wider, and more accurate requirement. Describing a colleague who uses a wheelchair as "confined to a wheelchair" is factually backwards: the chair is the tool of their freedom, not their confinement. When you test a phrase by asking "is this actually true, exactly as written?", a surprising share of problem phrases fail on truth before they fail on kindness. The second habit is neutrality where neutrality is possible. Many sentences carry information about people that the sentence does not need: their gender, marital status, age, or background. "The manageress will meet the firemen" tells you genders the reader did not need; "the manager will meet the firefighters" loses nothing and includes everyone. Where a detail is irrelevant, the inclusive move is usually just to leave it out — and irrelevant detail is the commonest form of exclusion there is. The third habit is using people's own terms. Groups and individuals have preferences about what they are called, and those preferences outrank your habits, your schooling, and what a style guide said twenty years ago. If a person tells you their name is pronounced a certain way, their pronouns, or the term they use for their condition or community, the professional response is to use it — not to debate it, grade it, or substitute your own. The fourth habit is checking assumptions in the frame of the sentence. Whole phrases smuggle in a picture of the normal person: "when you have your own children," "a normal working week," "everyone celebrates at Christmas," "even your grandmother could use it." Each assumes a life the reader may not have. Reframing — "if you have children," "the standard working week," "the holiday season," "a first-time user could follow it" — keeps the meaning and drops the assumption.

Two reassurances belong here, because anxiety about language makes people worse at it, not better. First, intention matters but impact decides what to fix: if a phrase lands badly, the fact that you meant well is a reason to correct it without shame, not a reason to leave it standing.

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Second, nobody is keeping a perfect score. Inclusive language is a practice, like clear writing — you get better at it, you build it into templates so you do not have to remember it under pressure, and you treat corrections as editing, not as verdicts on your character. The people who are worst at inclusive language are not the ones who occasionally slip; they are the ones who decide the whole subject is beneath them and stop thinking. The fact that you are reading this set puts you in the other group.

The Steps

1. Test phrases for accuracy first: is this exactly true as written, for the whole audience it will reach?
2. Remove irrelevant personal detail — gender, age, marital status, background — from sentences that do not need it.
3. Use the terms people use for themselves: their name and its pronunciation, their pronouns, their community's current preferred terms.
4. Scan for smuggled assumptions — about family, faith, bodies, and "normal" lives — and reframe the sentence to keep the meaning without the assumption.
5. When you are unsure between two phrasings, choose the one that describes the work, the role, or the situation rather than the kind of person.
6. Build your good choices into templates and saved text so the inclusive version is the default, not the effort.

A Worked Example

A training manager named Helen rewrote her department's standard welcome email using nothing but the four habits. The original read: "Welcome aboard, young man! Your supervisor will be Mrs Carter — she'll show you the ropes, and don't worry, even the girls in the office found the system easy to learn. If your wife needs to reach you during training, she can call reception." Helen's rewrite took ten minutes: "Welcome to the team. Your supervisor, Alex Carter, will meet you at reception and introduce you to the system — it is designed to be picked up step by step, and Alex will go at your pace. If anyone needs to reach you urgently during training, they can call reception and we will find you." Every fix came from the habits: "young man" and "the girls" failed neutrality and accuracy; "Mrs" announced a marital status nobody needed; "even… easy" assumed difficulty by gender; "your wife" assumed a family the new starter might not have. Nothing in the rewrite is strained or unusual to read — which is the point. Inclusive language, done well, does not sound like anything. It just quietly fits everyone it reaches.

Common Mistakes

- **Treating inclusive language as a list of banned words.** Lists go stale and miss the point; the habits — accuracy, neutrality, people's own terms, checked assumptions — handle new situations on their own.
- **Defending a phrase by intention.** "I didn't mean anything by it" may be true and is still not a fix. Correct the words; the intention will be believed because you did.

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- **Overcorrecting into stiffness.** If a sentence becomes so cautious nobody can understand it, rewrite for plainness: the most inclusive sentence is usually also the clearest one.
- **Only fixing speech, not systems.** Polished conversation over unchanged forms, templates, and adverts is decoration. The written defaults are where language does its lasting work.

Lesson 2 — Disability: Person-First, Identity-First, and Plain Accuracy

Disability is the area where good intentions collide most visibly with changing preferences, so it deserves a careful lesson. The starting point is that disabled people are not a single audience with a single preference. Two broad styles exist. Person-first language puts the person before the condition: "a person with epilepsy," "a colleague who has diabetes," "a student with dyslexia." Identity-first language puts the identity first, because many people experience it as an inseparable part of who they are rather than an add-on: "a disabled person," "an autistic person," "a Deaf person" — capital D Deaf specifically marks cultural membership of the Deaf community, distinct from the medical fact of deafness. Broadly, person-first is the traditional default in health, education, and official writing, while many in the autistic, Deaf, and blind communities prefer identity-first. The professional rule resolves the apparent conflict: use the term the person or community in front of you uses for themselves. When writing for a general audience with no specific person in view, follow the convention of the community most concerned where one is well established — "autistic person" and "Deaf person" are widely preferred by those communities — and person-first elsewhere is a safe, respectful default. When writing about a named individual, mirror their own words. What never helps is arguing with a person's own term for themselves.

Accuracy does most of the remaining work. A wheelchair is a mobility tool: someone "uses a wheelchair," they are not "confined to" or "bound to" it. Conditions are not suffering by definition: "lives with," "has," or simply naming the condition is accurate, while "suffers from" and "afflicted by" import a tragedy the person may not feel. Avoid turning people into their diagnoses in contexts where the diagnosis is irrelevant — a colleague's condition almost never belongs in a meeting introduction, a rota, or a reference — and avoid the opposite error of euphemism so thick it becomes untrue: "differently abled" and "special needs" are widely disliked by disabled people themselves, who generally prefer the plain word "disabled" used straightforwardly. Plain is respectful. Also retire the inspirational frame in workplace writing: a disabled colleague doing their job is not "brave" or "inspiring" for doing it, and saying so announces that you expected less of them. Praise their work the way you praise anyone's work — for the work.

Mental health language needs the same accuracy. Use the actual terms people and professionals use — depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia — when they are relevant and known, and do not use them as metaphors: a changeable week is not "bipolar weather" for a policy, a tidy desk is not "my OCD," and a disappointing result is not "depressing" in a formal report if you can say "disappointing" instead. Never use outdated clinical terms that have become insults — words like "retarded," "spastic," or "cripple" have no place in any

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workplace document or conversation, including quoted in jest. Language about access follows the same plain standard: describe facilities factually — "step-free access," "hearing loop fitted," "large-print version available" — because precise access information is itself inclusion: it lets people plan without having to ask and disclose.

The Steps

1. Mirror the individual: whatever term a person uses for their own condition or identity is the term you use for them.
2. For general writing, use established community preferences — "autistic person," "Deaf person" — and person-first phrasing ("person with…") as the default elsewhere.
3. Write "uses a wheelchair," "has [condition]," "lives with [condition]" — and drop "confined to," "suffers from," "afflicted," and "victim of."
4. Mention disability only when it is relevant to the matter at hand, and praise disabled colleagues for their work, never for existing at work.
5. Do not use conditions as metaphors or jokes, and remove outdated clinical insults from every document, template, and slide.
6. State access plainly and factually in event and document information: step-free access, hearing loop, large print, captions, quiet space.

A Worked Example

An HR officer, Grace, was asked to review the staff handbook's sickness and adjustments section. The old text read: "Employees suffering from disabilities or handicapped in any way should inform their manager, who will endeavour to help the afflicted member of staff cope. Wheelchair-bound employees may use the goods lift." Grace's rewrite shows every principle in one paragraph: "If you are disabled or have a health condition that affects your work, you can talk to your manager or to HR about adjustments at any time — you do not need to wait for a problem. Colleagues who use a wheelchair can reach all floors by the main lifts, which are step-free. Information about adjustments is treated in confidence." "Suffering," "handicapped," "afflicted," and "wheelchair-bound" all disappeared — replaced by the plain word "disabled," the accurate "use a wheelchair," and factual access information. She also changed "inform their manager" into an open door with two routes and a confidence promise, because the old sentence had made disclosure sound like a duty performed under supervision. The paragraph got shorter. It also, for the first time, sounded like it had been written by someone who expected disabled people to read it.

Common Mistakes

- **Insisting on one style for everyone.** Correcting an autistic colleague's "I am autistic" into "person with autism" is not inclusion; it is overruling the person about themselves.
- **Euphemisms that dodge the word.** "Differently abled" and "special" are rejected by most of the people they describe. Plain, accurate words respect adults.

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- **Tragedy language by default.** "Suffers from" assumes a life story you do not know. Many people regard their condition as a neutral fact or even a valued identity.
- **Inspiration framing.** Calling ordinary work brave because a disabled person did it sets the bar at existence — and everyone in the room hears it.
- **Irrelevant disclosure.** Naming a colleague's condition where it has no bearing on the matter outs information that was never yours to circulate.

Lesson 3 — Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Saying What You Mean, About Who Is Actually There

Writing and speaking about race and ethnicity well rests on three disciplines: use the terms communities use for themselves, be specific rather than vague, and mention race only when it is relevant — the same relevance test as every other characteristic. Terms change and differ between countries. In the United States, "Black" is widely used and capitalized in modern style, as is "Indigenous" and "Native American," while the people concerned may prefer a specific nation or tribal name above all general terms — use it when you know it. "People of color" is a common collective term in US writing; in the United Kingdom, official writing has moved away from collective acronyms toward naming the specific groups meant, because a sentence about "communities" that actually concerns one community should say which. The transferable rule for any country is: prefer the specific over the umbrella — "our Bangladeshi and Pakistani customers in this district" says more and respects more than a generic label — and where a collective term is needed, use the one current in your place and field, and update it when it changes. Avoid outdated terms entirely: words that were once administrative — "colored," "Oriental" applied to people, "half-caste," and their equivalents — are now received as slurs or relics, whatever the speaker's vintage, and they have no place in current documents. Avoid also the subtler failures: describing a colleague as "articulate" or "well-spoken" as surprised praise, asking a person where they are "really from" after they have answered, touching or commenting on hair, or using nationality, accent, or name as a punchline. Each announces that you regard the person as an exception to a picture in your head. And in writing, never use race as a visual shorthand in examples, case studies, or fiction in training materials where the criminal, the problem customer, or the hero is consistently drawn from one group — patterns in examples teach louder than the lesson around them.

Gender asks for a parallel set of habits, most of them simple removals. English carries a stock of job titles and general words built on "man": chairman, manpower, manning the desk, man-hours, salesman, fireman, policeman, postman, stewardess, manageress, actress in contexts where "actor" serves everyone. In every case a neutral word exists that is shorter, current, and loses nothing: chair or chairperson, workforce or staffing, staffing the desk, work hours, salesperson, firefighter, police officer, postal worker, flight attendant, manager, actor. Use them as defaults in all documents and speech. For people whose gender you do not know — the generic customer, the next applicant, the author of a report — the singular "they" is now standard in careful writing worldwide and solves the old "he/she" clumsiness in one word: "Each applicant should bring their identification." Address groups neutrally too: "everyone," "team," "colleagues," and "folks"

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include the whole room in a way "guys" and "ladies and gentlemen" increasingly do not, and in formal writing "Dear colleagues" or the person's name outperforms guessing at "Mr/Mrs/Miss." Titles deserve one clear rule: use "Ms" as the default for a woman unless she uses another title herself, never guess marital status into a "Mrs" or "Miss," and where your forms allow, include "Mx" — the established gender-neutral title — alongside the others. Pronouns follow the golden rule of this whole set: a person's pronouns are a fact about them, like their name. Use the ones they use. If you do not know, "they" carries you safely until you do. In introductions and directories, sharing pronouns is becoming a normal professional courtesy in many workplaces; whether or not your workplace does it formally, never make an individual colleague's pronouns a subject of debate, commentary, or humour. Getting a name or pronoun wrong happens; Lesson 5 covers the graceful correction — brief apology, correct form, move on.

The Steps

1. Prefer specific group names over umbrella labels, use the collective terms current in your country and field, and update saved text when usage changes.
2. Remove outdated racial terms from every document and template without exception, and never use race, accent, or names as humour.
3. Mention race or ethnicity only when relevant — and audit examples, case studies, and images for one-group patterns.
4. Replace "man"-built job words with the neutral standard: chair, workforce, firefighter, police officer, salesperson, flight attendant, work hours.
5. Use singular "they" for a person whose gender is unknown, and neutral group addresses — "everyone," "team," "colleagues."
6. Default to "Ms" for women, offer "Mx" on forms, never guess marital status, and use each person's own name and pronouns as the facts they are.

A Worked Example

A recruitment team rewrote a long-running advert for a warehouse supervisor. The original asked for "a strong man for a manpower-heavy operation — a company man who can command his men and isn't afraid to crack the whip," required candidates to be "clean-shaven for respirator duties," and addressed replies to "Mr D. Osei, Personnel Manager." The rewrite kept every real requirement and lost every exclusion: "We are looking for a supervisor for a physically demanding, team-based operation — someone who can lead a shift team clearly and fairly. The role includes respirator duties on some tasks, for which a close seal is required; we will discuss fit options, including alternative equipment, with shortlisted candidates. Replies to D. Osei, People Manager." The applicant pool for the next round changed visibly — more women applied, and the successful candidate, a woman with ten years' warehouse experience, told the panel she had seen the old advert in a previous year and not applied, because "it read like it had already decided who the job belonged to." Nothing about the job had changed. The language had stopped pre-selecting its reader.

Common Mistakes

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• **Surprised compliments.** "You speak so well," "you are so articulate" — praise with astonishment inside it tells the person what you expected of people like them.

• **"Where are you really from?"** Asked after an answer has been given, it informs a colleague that their answer — their home — is not accepted as real.

• **Assuming neutral words are longer or harder.** Firefighter is not a compromise on fireman; it is the accurate word for the whole workforce that does the job.

• **Guessing titles and pronouns to sound polite.** A guessed "Mrs" or "he" is a small error delivered with confidence. "Ms," "Mx," "they," and the person's name exist precisely so you do not have to guess.

• **Debating a person's own terms.** The meeting about whether a colleague's pronouns or community's name are "correct" should never happen. Use them; the respect is the point.

Lesson 4 — Age, Faith, and Family: Removing the Assumptions in the Frame

Some exclusions do not name a group at all; they live in the frame of the sentence, in what it treats as normal. Age is the clearest case, because age assumptions run in both directions and are often illegal as well as unkind. Job language is the worst offender: "young and energetic team," "digital native," "recent graduate" used as a proxy for cheap and mouldable, "over-qualified" used as a courteous fiction, "energetic" and "dynamic" doing duty as coded age filters. Each either deters experienced applicants — who read them accurately as "not you" — or is simply inaccurate: energy and digital fluency are individual traits found at every age, and the honest advert names the trait it actually needs ("confident learning new software quickly," "comfortable in a fast-paced rota") and lets every age apply. At the other end, patronizing frames do the same work in reverse: "even our older staff managed the new system" builds low expectation into a compliment, and describing an experienced colleague as "old school" or a younger one as "just a kid" replaces the person's actual competence with their birth year. In documents, avoid defining people by generation labels — "millennials want," "boomers resist" — which are horoscopes dressed as analysis. Describe behaviour and need, not cohorts. Experience should be specified in years or skills where it matters ("three years' experience of X" is a requirement; "seasoned" and "junior" as identities are fog).

Faith and belief deserve the same framing care, and the companion lessons in this category cover Muslim colleagues in depth; the language rules generalize. Do not build one faith's calendar into supposedly universal phrases: "our Christmas closure" is accurate if that is what it is, but "the holiday period" serves when you mean the whole season, and scheduling language should never assume everyone's holy day is the same day. Avoid using faith words as casual metaphors — "a come-to-Jesus meeting," "our crusade for sales," "the mecca of bargain hunters" — which borrow sacred vocabulary for office colour and land, on the people whose vocabulary it is, as carelessness about what they hold dear. Never use a faith or its followers as shorthand for a trait — stinginess, strictness, terrorism, wealth — in any phrase, joke, or example; these are among the oldest exclusionary patterns in language and they are never as original as the speaker thinks. And write about belief with the same relevance rule: a colleague's

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faith belongs in a sentence when it is the subject — a leave request, a catering note — not as decoration or explanation for their behaviour.

Family status completes the frame. Modern workplaces contain every shape of household: single people, couples with and without children, single parents, blended families, carers of adult relatives, people whose family is chosen rather than related. Language that assumes one shape — "your wife/husband" as the default for a partner, "when you have children" to a colleague whose plans you do not know, "family man" as a compliment meaning reliable, "working mother" used where "working father" never appears, maternity assumptions aimed at every woman of a certain age — quietly ranks lives. The fixes are the neutral words: "partner," or "spouse" where married is known; "parental leave" in policy wherever the law allows it to be shared; "if you have caring responsibilities" instead of a guess at their shape. Events language matters too: invitations "plus guest" rather than "and wife," and social planning that does not treat colleagues without children as infinitely available for every evening and holiday shift. Accuracy, again, is the whole secret: say the true, general thing, and everyone can find themselves in it.

The Steps

1. Strip age codes from adverts and role descriptions: replace "young," "dynamic," "digital native," and "recent graduate" with the actual trait or skill required.
2. Never frame competence by age in either direction — no "even our older staff managed," no "just a kid," no generation-label explanations of behaviour.
3. Keep faith out of metaphors and shorthand, name holidays accurately, and use season-wide words when you mean the whole season.
4. Use neutral relationship words by default — partner, spouse where known, parental leave — and never assume a colleague's family shape or plans.
5. Apply the relevance test to faith and family exactly as to everything else: in the sentence when it is the subject, out of it when it is not.

A Worked Example

A manager drafting the Christmas rota email wrote: "As usual, the family men will want Christmas Day itself, so singles and the younger staff will cover the 25th, and the mums can take the early shifts so they are home for the kids' tea. Don't worry — we'll make it up to you in the New Year!" She caught it on a second read, because three assumptions had stacked into a policy: that family means married men, that single and younger staff have Christmases that matter less, and that mothers — but not fathers — arrange work around children's tea. Her rewrite took the rota out of the frame of anyone's life: "Christmas shifts are open for requests from everyone on the same basis. Tell me by Friday which days matter most to you and which you are happiest to cover, and I will balance the requests as fairly as I can across the team, as I did last year." Requests that year included a single colleague for whom Christmas Day with her elderly father was the most important day of her year, and a father who wanted the early shifts for exactly the tea-time reason the original had reserved for "the mums." The fair version was not harder to write. It was only harder to write lazily — which is most of what this lesson asks.

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Common Mistakes

- **Coded adverts.** "Energetic," "digital native," and "young team" are read by experienced applicants as exclusions — because that is usually what they are.
- **Generation labels as analysis.** "Millennials are…" explains nothing, dates instantly, and insults two directions at once.
- **Sacred words as office slang.** Faith metaphors and faith-as-shorthand phrases borrow other people's deepest commitments for decoration. Plain words do the job better.
- **The default family.** Assuming a wife, assuming children, assuming childlessness means availability — each assumption tells some colleague their life was not the one the writer pictured.
- **Complimenting by category.** "Family man," "career girl," "working mum" as praise grades a person's private life. Praise the work and the conduct, which are the parts you actually know.

Lesson 5 — Correcting Yourself, Accepting Correction, and Fixing the Templates

Everything so far has been about choosing well in advance. This lesson is about the moments when choice has already happened — you have said or written the thing, and it was wrong — and about the systems that stop the same wrong thing recurring. Both matter, because a workplace's language culture is set less by its best sentences than by how it behaves in the ten seconds after a bad one.

Correcting yourself follows a short, reliable pattern: notice, correct briefly, continue. If you catch yourself mid-sentence — wrong pronoun, outdated term, an assumption you just heard yourself make — the repair is a breath, not a ceremony: "…and he — she — will lead the session." If someone corrects you, the pattern is: thank, correct, continue. "Thanks — she will lead the session." That is the whole performance. What makes corrections feel enormous is everything people add around them: the long apology that makes the corrected person comfort the corrector; the self-flagellation that turns a pronoun into a five-minute seminar on your own guilt; the defensive explanation — "well, in my day we said…" — that argues with the correction; or the joke at your own expense that invites the room to laugh the matter away. Each of these transfers the cost of your slip onto the person who was kind enough to mention it, and teaches everyone watching never to correct you again. The graceful version is almost disappointingly small, and that is its virtue: it treats the correction as ordinary editing, the same as being told you mispronounced a supplier's name. Do the same when you write: if an error is spotted in a document, fix it in the next version without drama or footnote, and if the document is live and the error is material, fix it now and note the change plainly if anyone was affected.

Accepting correction well also means never keeping score in the other direction. When you hear a colleague use language that excludes, the proportionate response is usually a quiet, specific, private word — "we say 'firefighter' in the handbook now" — offered as information, not prosecution. Most people, given the fact without the verdict, simply update. Reserve firmer

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handling for patterns: repeated use after correction, deliberate use to wound, or language aimed at a person present. And managers carry one extra duty: never let a correction be punished socially. If the person who gently corrects gets mocked for it, the team's language freezes at its worst speaker's level.

The durable fix, though, is never individual memory — it is the templates. Language lives longest in the documents a workplace reuses: job advert templates, offer letters, the handbook, standard emails, forms, slide decks, the website's boilerplate, and the phrases saved in shared drives. Audit them once, thoroughly, and inclusive language becomes the default that nobody has to remember. The audit is methodical. Gather the current templates. Search them for the patterns this set has taught: "man"-built job words and gendered defaults; marital-status guesses and "he/she" constructions; age codes in recruitment text; outdated disability and race terms; assumption frames about family, faith, and the "normal" employee; forms that force a title from a short list or a gender from two boxes where the information is not genuinely needed. Rewrite each at the source, date the new versions, and retire the old files so nobody resurrects them from a shared folder. Add the standing checks to the processes that create new language: a line in the recruitment checklist ("advert read once for coded language"), a proofing step for external documents, a named owner for the style choices so updates — and usage will keep changing — have somewhere to land. Keep a short, living style note for your team: one page, the current preferred terms and the reasoning, written in the plain style of this set, reviewed yearly. A page people actually read beats a policy nobody opens.

The Steps

1. Self-correct in the moment with the short pattern: brief correction, no ceremony, carry on with the sentence.
2. When corrected by someone else: thank them, use the correct form immediately, and continue — no defence, no long apology, no joke.
3. Never punish or mock a correction, socially or otherwise; as a manager, protect the corrector visibly.
4. Correct others proportionately: a quiet, specific, private word first; firmer steps only for repeated or deliberate use.
5. Audit the templates at the source: adverts, letters, handbook, forms, standard emails, slides, and web boilerplate — searching for every pattern in this set.
6. Retire old versions, date the new ones, and add a language check to the recruitment and publishing processes.
7. Keep a one-page living style note of current preferred terms, owned by a named person and reviewed once a year.

A Worked Example

A project lead named Marcus was presenting to a client when he heard himself say, "Our chairman will sign it off, and his girl in contracts will chase the paperwork." Two errors in one sentence, in front of an audience. He did the small thing: "— the chair will sign it off, and Priya in

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contracts will chase the paperwork." No pause for apology, no wince, no joke. Afterwards, the client — who had noticed both the slip and the repair — mentioned it approvingly to Marcus's director: not the mistake, but the recovery, which read as a company whose standards were real enough to operate mid-sentence. Marcus then did the second half of this lesson. Back at the office he searched the shared drive for the templates the sentence had come from and found "chairman" in four documents and "his girl" attitudes fossilized in a standard client-update email that called the contracts team "the girls in contracts." He rewrote the templates, deleted the old versions rather than archiving them alongside, and added one line to the team's project checklist: standard text checked at setup. The following quarter, the phrase simply never occurred — not because forty people remembered a rule, but because the documents no longer contained it. That is the deepest lesson in this set: willpower is a poor tool and defaults are a superb one. Fix the text at the source, and the inclusive version becomes the path of least resistance for everyone who comes after you.

Common Mistakes

- **The apology performance.** A long, emotional apology for a small slip makes the other person manage your feelings and turns editing into theatre. Brief is kind.
- **Arguing with a correction.** "That's what we've always said" is a history fact, not a rebuttal. Usage changes; professionals update.
- **Correcting to score points.** Public, gleeful correction of a colleague's slip teaches the room to fear the subject, not to learn it. Private and specific wins.
- **Fixing your speech but not your files.** If the templates still say "chairman," the templates will win — they are used more often than anyone's intentions.
- **Freezing the style note forever.** Preferred terms evolve. A dated, owned, yearly-reviewed one-page note stays useful; a grand policy from five years ago becomes the next problem.

Try It — The Document Sweep and the Week of Listening

Two exercises, one for your documents and one for your ears. First, the sweep: choose the five written things your team sends most — likely a job advert template, a standard customer email, an offer or welcome letter, a meeting invitation with joining instructions, and one web or handbook page. Read each one slowly with this set's checklist beside you: gendered job words and defaults; guessed titles and marital status; age codes; disability language; race terms; assumptions about family, faith, and the normal reader; access information stated or missing. Rewrite what you find at the source, retire the old versions the same day, and write the date on the new ones. Note how many of the fixes cost nothing but attention — that count is your evidence, next time someone calls this work expensive. Second, the week of listening: for five working days, keep a private note of phrases you hear — including your own — that include or exclude: the group greeting that covered the whole room or did not, the assumption inside a rota request, the correction handled gracefully or badly. Do not intervene in the diary-keeping; just collect. At the week's end, sort your notes into patterns and pick the single commonest one. That pattern — not a list of everything — is your team's next fix, and it goes into the templates, the checklist, or the style note, wherever it lives. Language culture changes exactly this way:

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one honest observation, one source fixed, repeated patiently until the inclusive version is simply how your workplace sounds.

Fortress shares what I learned, not professional advice.

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