Guidelines for Achieving Bias-Free Communication

1. Be aware of words, images and situations that suggest that all or most members of a group are the same.

Stereotypes often lead to assumptions that are unsupportable and offensive.

[Example: The writer who describes Mexican children as “well-dressed” may be unconsciously portraying this as an exception to a mental image of a “poor” or “unkempt” Mexican.]

2. Avoid qualifiers that reinforce stereotypes.

A qualifier is added information that suggests what is being said is an exception to what is expected. [Examples: “A group of intelligent black students were guests as part of the orientation program.” A helpful test is to consider whether a member of the majority population is likely to be described in the same way; i.e. “the intelligent white students.”]

3. Identify people by identity characteristics only when relevant.

Very few situations require such identification. [Example: If this identification is inappropriate, “Michael Bloomberg, noted heterosexual mayor of New York,” is this phrasing any different: “twenty-two House Democrats, led by gay Democratic Representative Barney Frank . . .?”]

4. Be aware of language that, to some people, has questionable racial or ethnic connotations.
While a word or phrase may not be personally offensive to you, it may be to others. [Examples: Culturally deprived or culturally disadvantaged. These terms imply superiority of one culture over another. In fact, people so labeled are often bicultural and bilingual. Non-white – this word implies that white is the standard. In North American language, similar phrases such as “non-black” or “non-yellow” do not exist. Minority—this word is accurate in North America; however, its use ignores the fact that people of color comprise the majority of the world’s population (and may comprise the majority of one’s immediate locale).]

5. Be aware of the possible negative implications of color symbolic words.
Choose language and usage that do not offend people or reinforce bias. In some instances, black and yellow have become associated with the undesirable or negative. [Examples: “black reputation” and “yellow coward”]

6. Avoid patronizing language and tokenism toward any racial or ethnic group.
[Example: Once-a-year articles or special editions about a particular group may be interpreted as cultural tokenism, especially when such a group constitutes a large part of your community. This approach may suggest that that racial or ethnic group is out of the mainstream.]

7. Substitute substantive information for ethnic clichés.
Don’t let ethnic clichés substitute for in-depth information. [Example: A person of Spanish heritage might prefer to be asked about family history or political experiences than about fiestas.]

8. Review media to see if all groups are fairly represented.
[Examples: Are persons portrayed in positions of authority almost invariably white? Does your media provide racial and ethnic role models?]