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?*