

# inclusive workplaces

## Inclusive communication guide



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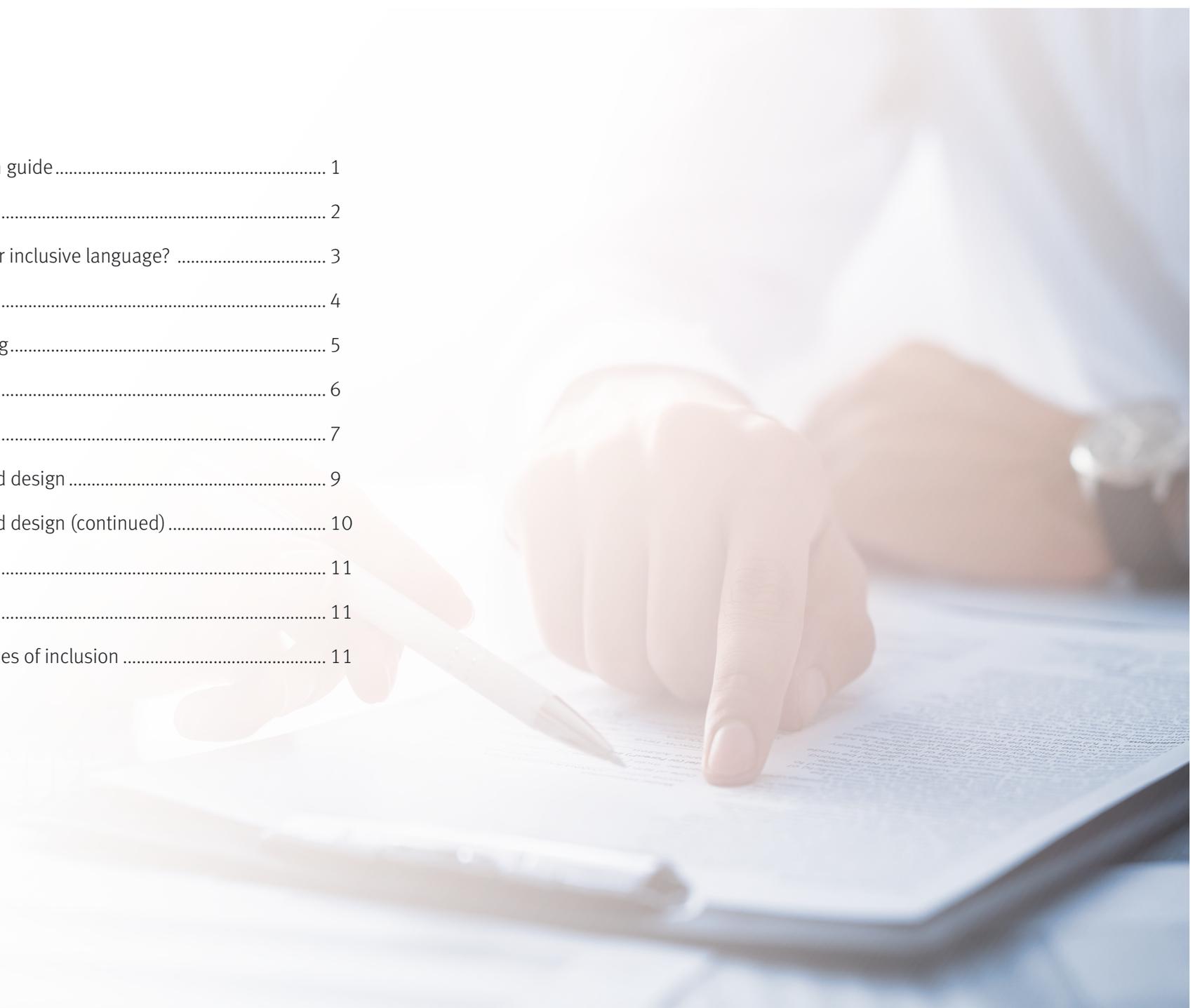
**weallbelong**  
embracing workplace inclusion and diversity



**Queensland  
Government**

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# Inclusive communication guide

Inclusive communication is effective communication – respectful, accurate and inclusive of all – enabling everyone to contribute diverse perspectives and feel like they belong.

This Inclusive communication guide is a working document developed by the Diversity, Culture and Engagement team to be used by managers, teams and individuals as a guide to building more inclusive workplace cultures.

This guide is recommended as a learning tool; rather than a set of 'rules'.

## Purpose of this guide

- To enable all team members to walk the talk when it comes to inclusive communication
- Act as a positive reference guide when policies and documents are updated

## What is inclusive communication

- Inclusive communication is effective communication – respectful, accurate, accessible and relevant to all
- Person centred approach
- Language, processes and words that are free from stereotypes and biases

## Why is it important

- Workplace culture – engagement, productivity, innovation, wellbeing
- Employer of choice, increased performance, people feel valued, can contribute their perspectives, feel like they belong
- Promotes respectful relationships
- Avoids false assumptions, stereotypes and biases that affect fairness of decision making
- Enables everyone to understand and be understood

## Apply it widely

- Team work, presentations, meetings, decision-making, design
- Departmental documents internal or external
- When engaging contractors and external organisations
- When building or using animations, videos, images or other visual content



# Inclusive language

People can tend to use non-inclusive language unwittingly, often not aware that it can exclude. The context and the person you are interacting with can guide your communication. With a growth mindset, we are all learning all the time on how to be inclusive. If you make a mistake, make it a learning opportunity for next time. Note what might be socially appropriate, may not be appropriate in a work context.

**Key principles:** think about the context, focus on the person, listen to the language they use to describe themselves, if in doubt – ask the person.

- Not all people identify with being a man or a woman. People who are gender non-conforming or non-binary may prefer gender neutral pronouns and titles such as “they/them/their” or “Mx”
- “All genders” instead of “both genders” or “opposite sex”
- Moving away from binary language is more inclusive of people of all genders “everyone” or “all” instead of “ladies and gentlemen”
- “Chairperson” instead of “chairman”
- “Traditional Custodians”
- Focus on the accessibility or disability barrier, instead of the person’s impairment
- Use person-first language “Persons of all abilities”, “person with <identity e.g. low vision, disability>”, “person who is <identity e.g. deaf or hard of hearing>” or “person without disability”
- Some people may prefer identity-first language “Autistic person”. It is important to respect the language people use to describe themselves.
- Choose to share information about the disability faced and/or impairment rather than “disclose”

## Avoid

- Using social context when at work e.g. introductions “women in the office” or “men in the office” instead of “girls in the office” or “boys in the office”
- Gendered language e.g. use gender-neutral terms such as police officer for professions instead of gender-specific job titles such as policeman/policewoman
- Victim or objects of pity e.g. “suffering from...”, “struck down by...”, and “afflicted by/with...”
- “Disclosure”, “declaration of disability”, “identify as a person with disability”

## Why does inclusive language matter?

The language we choose is vital to enabling everyone in our organisation to feel like they belong. When we use the words that others use to describe themselves, we create a workplace where everyone feels valued and is welcome to be themselves.

Remember, whether we intend to or not, the words we choose to use may include or exclude those around us.

# Inclusive interactions

Building inclusive interactions starts with developing self-awareness of your own blind spots. Research finds that we make judgements about a person's trustworthiness, competence, aggressiveness, likeability and attractiveness within the first 100 milliseconds of seeing a new face (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Beginning with inclusive listening slows down these snap assumptions, and makes other people feel valued and understood.

When listening to others, we tend to assume we understand and we reach conclusions based on our point of view and our biases. Inclusive listening doesn't make assumptions but instead requires actively engaging in critical thinking: noticing and questioning our assumptions and asking open questions. Consider taking the online anonymous [Harvard Implicit Association Test to test your blind spots](#).

**Key principles:** start with your own blind spots, engage in active listening and open questions.

- Give someone your full attention when they're talking
- Ask for the correct pronunciation of an unfamiliar name – make an effort to get it right
- Ask for permission before calling someone by a nickname (and think about who has a nickname and who doesn't and how using nicknames in an office setting can be exclusionary)
- Acknowledge people when you pass them in the office, not just those in your 'in-group'
- Provide feedback in a sensitive and caring manner, seeking permission to do so when appropriate
- Use open questioning to confirm and build on your understanding when you feel like you are making assumptions

## Avoid

- Assuming that acronyms are understood by all
- Assuming about accents/linking these assumptions to knowledge levels
- Associating women with warmth and men with competence. Many studies show these gendered assumptions are automatic, stereotypical and held by many according to gendered roles in our society
- Stereotypical comments or jokes about identity groups
- Assuming what a person is or is not capable of. If unsure, offer to help, instead of taking over
- Assuming all people are heterosexual. For example, if asking about a person's personal relationships use the word partner rather than girlfriend/boyfriend/husband/wife
- Making assumptions around flexible or return to work arrangements
- Making assumptions about skin colour and culture

### Why do inclusive interactions matter?

Even in situations where you might be trying to express a positive comment, consider if it is based on a stereotype or assumption - such as asking someone where they are from based on their accent.

Assumptions, generalisations or stereotypes create exclusion and can put a negative focus on a person's individual identity.

# Inclusive decision making

In our everyday lives, we make fast and competent decisions, however, fast thinking does not always lead us to make the most effective decisions (Kahneman, 2011).

Research shows that well-managed diverse teams tend to outperform homogenous groups, even if the members of the latter group are more capable, due to slowing down thinking by considering different perspectives (Scott, 2008). Inclusive decision making activates diversity to improve innovation, engagement, and results.

**Key principles:** share background and context, share complexities/ considerations, seek diverse perspectives, enable transparency.

- Ensure the decision making process includes representatives of people who the decision relates to
- Ask yourself which repeated decisions are the best to start with and gain early wins – and which decisions need to start from fresh
- Assess how often diverse perspectives are directly included in business decision-making processes
- Actively seek out multiple perspectives (especially those different to your own)
- Explicitly invite your peers to offer an alternative or dissenting view to avoid confirmation bias (looking for evidence to confirm our own beliefs or judgments and ignoring contradictory evidence)

- Use a range of communication channels to receive input on a project or idea – some team members will be more comfortable providing a follow up email or direct phone call rather than in a team setting
- Use decision devices such as pros/cons, evaluation sheets, grids to evaluate ideas
- Ensure others have a say in when/how/where they work

## Avoid

- Evaluating the person who is delivering the idea or making the decision; focus on the idea or decision on its merits
- Making assumptions about the age or ability of people and their experience, e.g. That younger people don't have enough experience, and older people are set in their ways
- Planting ideas or preconceived notions that lead others to a fixed outcome



# Inclusive meetings

Inviting diverse views and perspectives to meetings can miss the mark when meetings are not inclusive; potentially missing out on valuable input and opportunities those diverse insights lead to. Being more inclusive may not necessarily require extra work, but it does require some thought. Nobody needs to be excluded in order for someone else to be included.

**Key principles:** share agendas, assign a moderator, notice interruptions, set norms enabling equitable access and opportunity for all to contribute.

- Consider when and where a meeting should be held and who is invited to maximise diversity of thought and perspective
- Consider and outline the accessibility features of the meeting venue you have chosen (see inclusive events for further detail)
- Sharing the agenda in advance is effective communication, and enables others in the group to have a chance to process the information prior
- Consider the accessibility of communications (book Auslan interpreters, as needed, ensure a hearing loop is available if required) and provide presenters in advance with guidelines for making content accessible
- Provide the option to opt out of sharing video during online conferencing. Some participants may feel more comfortable sharing only audio

- Introduce all people in a meeting with equal level of acknowledgement, providing background contextual information to ensure inclusive information sharing
- Remind the group at the outset how important it is to hear from everyone who may want to contribute, and note that everyone should make efforts to hear each other out and limit interruptions
- Promote respectful dialogue, engagement, and debate
- If one person is dominating the meeting, asking them to take on a role of scribe tasks them with listening and creates a space for others
- Consider assigning someone to ensure that virtual participants are engaged including monitoring the 'chat function' if they want to add to the discussion
- After a discussion, consider going around the room and giving each participant a moment to add anything they didn't get to share

## Avoid

- Accusations of individuals excluding others – instead try role-modelling and 1:1 learning discussions

# Inclusive events

In order to plan events that are inclusive, it is necessary to go beyond simply accommodating or acknowledging people's differences, and instead, to create events that are universally designed – or inclusive for everyone.

**Key principles:** accessibility for all in the selection of venues, food, activities.

- Consider the accessibility of the venue including visibility of the presenter in relation to the screen and effects of glare
- Entrances, automatic doors, lifts, ramps, corridors, accessible bathrooms, pathways are easily available, functioning, clear of obstacles; welcomingers understand information on service animals; wayfinding materials and signage is easy to read; provide sufficient space between tables and table height
- For invitations, outline the accessibility features of the venue you have chosen and provide information about accessing the venue, including accessible parking, general parking, public transport, and venue drop-off points. Also, attendees to advise of any other accessibility requirements when registering so that these adjustments are managed as part of the meeting/event

*The message may look like:*

Access and inclusion: Please advise of any accessibility requirements you may have (access to venue, meeting materials, lighting, seating, room conditions or methods of presentation), at least five working days prior, so we can make the necessary adjustments and provisions before or during the meeting.

- Ensure guests and participants can register for the event in a range of ways, including by phone, email or online
- Consider the accessibility of communications

- Book Auslan interpreters, as needed, and discuss with the interpreter and Deaf participant where the best location is for reserved seating to ensure clear view; ensure a hearing loop is available; provide live captioning; provide adjustable height microphones or lapel microphones
- Provide presenters in advance with guidelines for making content accessible. Consider the accessibility of activities and tasks during the event
- Include an acknowledgment of country. For large, formal events, a Welcome to Country is more appropriate
- Meeting/event organiser to provide a verbal explanation of the venue layout.
- Promote respectful dialogue, engagement, and debate
- Catering: provide a variety of meal options and items that are easy to eat and are clearly labelled

## Avoid

- Strobe lighting or flashing lights
- Asking for gender markers in a registration form or RSVP. If for any reason gender must be asked for, please use “Woman, Man and Other” as the options

“We see the world not as it is,  
**but as we are.”**

Anais Nin

# Inclusive information and design

Behind inclusive and accessible information lies thought, empathy and inclusion. This doesn't happen by accident, it happens by planning and design. If you communicate with people, you need to know about accessibility that considers the varied needs (age, size, ability) of users.

## Accessibility checker

- Run Accessibility Checker before sending your email message or sharing your document or spreadsheet

## Link text

Imagine not being able to quickly scan a page of content to find the information you need.

- Concisely describe the link's target – where it will take the reader
- Link makes sense when read out of context (i.e. Without reading the surrounding text)
- Front-load with the most important words, e.g. Use “barriers to inclusion in the workplace”, instead of “learn more about barriers to inclusion in the workplace”
- If the link's purpose is a download, include the type and size of what will be downloaded, e.g. “We all belong’ workforce diversity and inclusion framework (PDF, 903KB)”
- Link is underlined and in a colour that stands out

## Avoid

- Ambiguous link text e.g. “read more” or “click here”

## Images

Imagine how much information, entertainment and understanding you'd miss out on if you couldn't see pictures.

- Add image descriptions (alternative text or alt text) for each shape, picture, chart, SmartArt graphic, graphic, diagram and table;
  1. Right-click the object, click Format Object, Format Picture, Format Chart Area, or other, and then click Alt Text
  2. In the Description box, enter an explanation of the shape, picture, chart, SmartArt graphic, or other object. This box should always be filled in
  3. If you want, in the Title box, enter a brief summary. This box should only be filled in if you are entering a detailed or long explanation in the Description box
- Succinctly and accurately reflect the content or function of the image
- If the image contains text, replicate the text in the description
- If the image is used as a link, describe the link destination in the description or use real text (not image of text)
- If the image is purely decorative, describe as “decorative” or a null alt (“” in HTML)
- Try to consider diversity when selecting imagery, such as looking for images other than the traditional “nuclear” family. Do however try to avoid tokenism and only use images that are relevant to the message
- Avoid gender dominance – where a person of either gender stands in front of the other
- Take cultural protocol into consideration when using images

# Inclusive information and design (continued)

## Headings

Imagine how difficult it would be to read a 200-page document without any headings. Imagine how frustrating it would be to find specific information within that document.

- Use 'true' headings

e.g. **Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3**

Outlook: found in the "Format Text" ribbon

Word: found in the "Home" ribbon (styles)

## Videos

Imagine watching your favourite movie without being able to see it or hear it.

- Include captions and audio-descriptions – an equivalent, synchronised, textual version of what is spoken throughout the video. (Closed captions can be turned on or off, whereas open captions are always visible)
- Include transcripts – a textual version of what is said during the video, and may include descriptions, explanations or comments
  - Try to consider diversity when selecting imagery, such as looking for images other than the traditional "nuclear" family. Do however try to avoid tokenism and only use images that are relevant to the message
  - Avoid gender dominance – where a person of either gender stands in front of the other
  - Take cultural protocol into consideration

If videos cannot be captioned or audio described, the presenter should supply any visual information that a person with low vision may not be able to access.

## Easy-read

- Clear, simple, inclusive language appropriate for your audience
- Left-align text
- Sans-serif fonts, such as Arial or Verdana
- Expand acronyms on first use and wherever else is reasonable
- Colour contrast between text and its background has a ratio of at least 4.5:1. Except for large text and purely incidental decorations (free tools to test this include vision Australia's colour contrast analyser)

## Avoid

- Excessive use of bold, capitals, italics and underlines
- Very small font sizes (ideally minimum 12pt)
- Using colour alone to convey information

## Alternative formats

- Written material is available in alternative formats, as required, before and after the event (e.g. braille, large print, audio, electronic, plain English/Easy English)

## Further references

The department is a member organisation of Diversity Council Australia (DCA) specialising in inclusion and diversity research. To access the following resources, department staff need to create a user ID. DCA has specific fact sheets on inclusive language for each of the following areas:

- #WordsAtWork Age Guide
- #WordsAtWork Cultural Background Guide
- #WordsAtWork Disability Guide
- #WordsAtWork Gender Guide
- #WordsAtWork Indigenous Guide
- #WordsAtWork LGBTI+ Guide

## Key sources

The following sources have been used in writing this document.

- DCA's inclusive communication tips & language guide Words At Work
- Victorian Governments Guide
- Australian Network on Disability Guide
- Tasmanian Education Department Guide
- Queensland Government Inclusive Language Guide
- Queensland Public Service Commission Inclusive Communications and Campaigns Guide
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2 (WCAG 2)
- Australian Network on Disability Beginner's Guide to Accessible Content
- Australian Network on Disability Event Accessibility Checklist

## Department's communities of inclusion

For more information and support join any of the following online communities for staff through The Learning Place:

- [True Colours Network](#)
- [Able – All Abilities](#)
- [All Kinds of Minds](#)
- [Parents and Carers](#)
- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander](#)
- [Many Cultures](#)
- [Generational Diversity](#)

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OnePortal – [We All Belong](#)



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