

SIERRA CLUB'S
Equity Language Guide





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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

One of the most visible ways the Sierra Club can demonstrate our commitment to equity, justice, and inclusion is by using respectful, thoughtful language in all of our communications. When we use outdated terms for people’s identities, or rely on metaphors that are dehumanizing, we risk alienating people from the Sierra Club and even from the broader environmental movement.

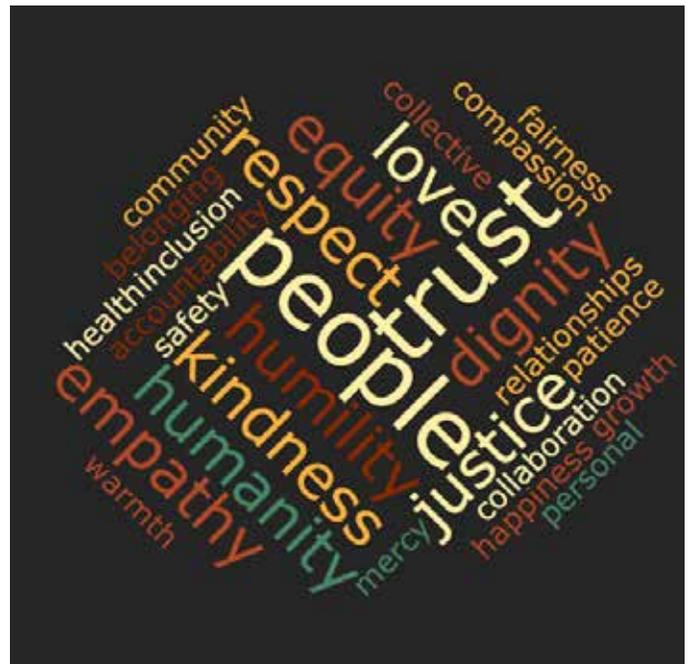
On a daily basis, Sierra Club content—from email blasts and social media posts to long-form articles in Sierra magazine—reaches hundreds of thousands of people. With every communication, we shape the public perception of our organization. This guide is intended to ensure that those communications present a consistent picture that reflects our organizational commitment to equity, inclusion, and justice.

The Sierra Club’s Equity Language Guide was developed by a cross-capacity team with support from the executive team, Equity department, Justice Cluster, the Gender, Equity, and Environment program, and many others. The guide is an advisory document; we ask that you review it carefully and refer to it when facing challenges in your own work. It may not be possible to implement every recommendation consistently, and some items in this guide are prompts for reflection. Some very important recommendations, however are highlighted in red with arrows to indicate that they are considered baseline expectations that everyone communicating on behalf of the Sierra Club must meet to avoid causing harm to people and to our own brand.

These guidelines are meant to apply to your public writing and communications on behalf of the Sierra Club, not your speech in the workplace or elsewhere. It is worth considering, however, how these

recommendations might help you to be more respectful to your colleagues and friends if you choose to incorporate them into your everyday speech.

Implementing the recommendations in this guide may require folks to slow down and move at the speed of trust in an environment where speed is often rewarded and even required given the fast-paced nature of our work. We encourage you to take the space and time you need to implement these recommendations in your own work thoughtfully, and to discuss the recommendations within your own teams to build consensus about how to implement them consistently.



OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

USE PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

When people living with disabilities offer advice on discussing issues related to ability, there's one point that's nearly universal: Use **people-first language**. Practicing people-first language means recognizing that everyone is first and foremost a person, not their disability or other identity. So when referring to someone with HIV, for example, refer to “a person living with HIV” rather than an “HIV patient” to avoid the implication that their

diagnosis is the sum total of their identity. This also applies to common socially stigmatized identities; for instance, “formerly incarcerated person” or “people with loved ones in prison” are respectful terms, as opposed to reductive terms like “inmate” or “felon.” People-first language is a useful approach to take with many identity issues throughout this guide.

BECOME CULTURALLY COMPETENT

If there is a particular group of people that you work with closely, it's important to develop a deep understanding of their culture, norms, and history. When you write about a group whose identity (e.g., racial or ethnic) you do not share or are not familiar with, we encourage you to explore language guides relevant to that culture. For example, if writing a piece for a Black community newspaper, take a look through the [National Association of Black Journalists Style Guide](#). The [Unity Journalists for Diversity Guides](#) contain a

wealth of resources developed by and for journalists, offering insight from the [Asian American Journalists Association Coverage Guide](#), the [Native American Journalists Association Guide](#), and others. We also encourage you to explore writings and news outlets run by people with identities relevant to your work, and to curate your social media feeds to familiarize yourself with the multiplicity of concerns and viewpoints of people within a particular community.

ASK BEFORE NAMING SOMEONE'S IDENTITY

It's a best practice to ask media interview subjects or spokespeople how they would like their identities to be described. That includes asking what pronoun they prefer, how they would like their racial or ethnic identity to be described, if at all, and clarifying any other identity categories you might want to use to describe them—for example, their age

or sexuality. There are as many ways to talk about identity as there are identities, so it's best to just ask.

If you are writing about or referring to a person or group with whom you are not in direct contact, make an effort to find their own writings or interviews online to gather information about how they refer to

themselves. It might be worth considering why you are writing about someone you are not in contact with—for instance, if they are a public figure, it's understood that many

people write about them. However, there may be times when we must consider whether it is appropriate for us to be telling someone's story without their consent or invitation.

SELF-IDENTIFIED

The descriptor “self-identified” can be a useful tool for writing about complex identities. If someone identifies as “queer”—an identity that has been reclaimed by LGBTQI communities to elevate it from its

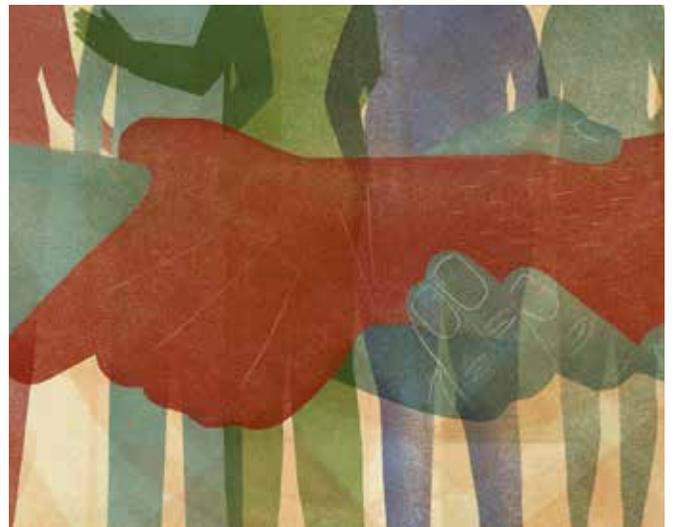
previous status as a slur—referring to them as a “self-identified queer activist” would make it clear that this person chooses to be identified this way.

COLLABORATION WITHOUT TOKENIZATION

Throughout this guide, we encourage people to work in collaboration with their teams to put these recommendations into practice. You're learning how to communicate more thoughtfully, so peer review of content can be an important tool to help you see your writing from a new perspective. If you're unsure about how to phrase something tricky, try checking in with a colleague.

You can also demonstrate respect for a colleague's time and expertise by doing

It is also important to note, however, that people with marginalized identities often receive requests for peer review or editing much more frequently than others. No one likes to be asked to speak on behalf of all people who share their identity. At the same time, it is appropriate to ask a colleague to offer a recommendation on the basis of their personal knowledge of a particular community. We simply ask that you be thoughtful and intentional about your requests for support and reflect on whether the person you are asking for support may feel tokenized by your request.



your own research first, requesting (not demanding) your colleague's input on specific questions that remain after you've put genuine effort into your own learning, thanking them, crediting them where appropriate, and making a note for the next time.

ACKNOWLEDGE HISTORY TO BUILD TRUST

This guide will tell you how to respectfully address many topics, and all of them are important. But there are a few areas where our legacy demands that we use extra care because of specific harm the Sierra Club has caused in the past. Groups of people who have been harmed by Sierra Club policies read

our communications for cues about whether we can currently be trusted as partners. To build trust, we must acknowledge our own history without trying to justify or explain it away. We must own up to the good and the bad, not just the parts that are flattering.

ABLEISM

Ableism is a way of thinking that values the lives, contributions, and perspectives of people living with disabilities less than those of people without disabilities. Ableism can show up in a number of ways—from outright employment discrimination to insensitive language use. We don't always realize the ways that our speech reflects an unconscious bias against people living with disabilities. The

most common example is the pervasive use of the word “crazy” or “insane” as a pejorative. For people struggling with mental health challenges, it can be exhausting to hear a medical issue be used as shorthand for every piece of bad news. When we characterize something nasty that a politician said as “crazy,” what are we implying about people struggling with mental health challenges?

TIPS ON HOW TO REFER TO PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

When writing about a person or persons with a disability, refer to the National Center on Disability and Journalism's [Disability](#)

[Language Style Guide](#) for specifics on how to respectfully describe particular disabilities.

COMMON PHRASES TO AVOID

➔ Legislators are “blind” (and/or “deaf”) to climate change.

- Instead of saying someone is “blind” to reality or “deaf” to the demands of their constituents, just say what's really happening—they're refusing to see or to listen.
- “Stand” in solidarity.
 - Whenever possible, we should use language that is inclusive of all people. Not everyone can stand, or speak

out, or make themselves heard. Many people with disabilities casually use terms tied to ability—a blind person might say “see you later!” for example—but if you can massage a sentence to avoid this issue, it's best to do so. “Stand” is the most common example of this challenge.

- Many organizations have begun to say “be in solidarity” or “protect our rights” rather than “stand up for our rights.”

- Another alternative is “rise,” because no matter what your physical abilities, you can rise to an occasion or rise to overcome.
- Think extra hard about using “stand” when it’s on a mass-produced sign or an ad that thousands of people will see and critique.

➔ The “lame” effort to defend this bill fell apart before it got started.

- It’s never acceptable to use the word “lame,” which is considered to be a slur. Instead, say the “incompetent” or “halfhearted” effort—when in doubt, just get more specific.

➔ The governor is “crippled” (or “handicapped”) by his connection to the fossil fuel lobby.

- “Cripple” is another word that historically refers to a disability and is now considered a slur. Instead of saying someone or something is “crippled,” try “hamstrung” or “held back.”

- **The amount of carbon produced is “dwarfed” by the amount saved.**

- It’s important to think about where the words we use come from. The word “dwarfed”—meaning, in this case, made to seem small by comparison—comes from the word “dwarf,” which is not how most people with the medical condition dwarfism prefer to be described. Instead, choose a different way to express scale that isn’t tied to identity and medical issues. Exceptions are proper names and scientific terms that include “dwarf,” as in “dwarf reindeer.”

- **The rhetoric coming out of the White House today is just “crazy” or “insane.” The House is “going nuts” (or “mad”) trying to stop this bill.**

- Instead of saying something is “crazy,” just be more specific! Is it bizarre, unprecedented, or extremist?

- ➔ At the Sierra Club, we should never use “crazy” or other terms about mental illness to pejoratively refer to a specific person.** Use of “crazy” or “nuts” to describe actions or events should also be avoided whenever possible.

AGEISM

Ageism shows up in our lives when we make assumptions about people based on their perceived or actual age. These kind of generalizations point both ways—older people often experience workplace discrimination, the most commonly understood form of ageism. On the other hand, young people experience ageism when they are treated

as less than full members of a community because of their youth and perceived inexperience. In both cases, generational differences can keep people from feeling included in communities, making it essential that we speak respectfully about age in all of our communications.

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT AGE

For more on the complexities of ageism, see the [Sum of Us Style Guide](#), which addresses

both ends of the ageism spectrum in greater detail.

- Consider whether there is a need to mention someone’s age at all. There are often good reasons to mention someone’s age—if they identify as a youth activist or an elder in a particular community, for example.
- Always ask interview subjects or spokespeople how they would like to be described—some folks prefer “senior” to “elder” or “student” to “youth.” With something so personal, it’s best just to ask.
- Avoid age-based comparisons that rely on negative or stereotypical depictions of people in certain age categories.
- Don’t assume that every member of a generation—for example, Millennials—has similar characteristics.
- When talking about the Sierra Club’s future and acknowledging the reality of our current age demographic, let’s consider how we are both striving to be a welcoming place for younger people to foster their involvement while also celebrating the contributions of our elders. We can talk about working toward having an intergenerational organization rather than saying, “we need more young people,” which can be tokenizing and devalues the contributions of our older members.
- Remember that identities intersect, and ageism impacts people differently on the basis of their gender. Women tend to face harsher social penalties for aging visibly; when writing about an older woman’s identity, ask yourself if you would mention her age if she were male.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Messaging around sexual and reproductive rights is a particularly sensitive issue because environmental groups, including many members and leaders of the Sierra Club, have used concern about “overpopulation” as a pseudo-scientific justification for racist and xenophobic policies to limit both immigration and reproductive freedom. The Sierra Club has made an intentional shift away from this legacy with our current focus on gender and rights. Our word choice can help signal our thoughtful commitment to this change, or it can undermine our efforts, which are still under legitimate scrutiny from communities that have been negatively impacted by state and nonprofit policies on reproductive health and rights, particularly women of color.

The Sierra Club’s work continues to evolve away from this viewpoint, aiming to be more



just, equitable, and inclusive. Today, we work on gender issues, not population issues.

Women and gender-nonconforming people are at a greater risk of environmental injustice, whether from climate disruption or from violence and pollution attributable to the dirty fuel industry.

For talking points on our Gender, Equity, and Environment program, see the [Gender Program Style Guide](#).

Outside of our own work on gender, the cultural conversation around gender and sexuality is changing quickly, particularly on the subject of pronouns. It's important that we keep up. The key is to ask people how they prefer to be identified and to be guided by their preferences.

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

- The Sierra Club uses “LGBTQI” as a default term for people who identify as gay, transgender, bi, intersex, or queer. “Gay” and “queer” are also appropriate. Check with the person you are referring to, or default to “LGBTQI” unless you deem “gay” or “queer” to be more culturally appropriate for your audience. Terms like bisexual, pansexual, and asexual (an umbrella term for people who do not experience sexual attraction) are appropriate if requested or used by the person you are referring to.

➔ **Never reduce queer identity to a punchline. Unconsidered homophobia of this type is unfortunately common in progressive circles—for example, jokes about conservative male politicians that rely on the implication that they have a sexual relationship.**

- There are regional and cultural differences for using the terms “trans” versus “transgender.” It is always best to check with the person you are referring to before using either.

➔ **Using the word “transgendered” is offensive and should be avoided. “Transsexual” is generally considered a slur today and should never be used**

by the Sierra Club unless specifically requested by someone we are writing about.

➔ **When writing about a specific individual, always confirm with them their gender and pronouns (she, her, hers; he, him, his; they, them, their; or different pronouns of their choice).**

➔ **When you do not know someone's gender, and have no way of asking them, follow AP style by defaulting to a gender-neutral “they” pronoun.**

- For example “Blair Fletcher, a climate activist, shook their fist in the air at the climate rally.”

- Use the term “cisgender” (rather than “non-trans” or “non-transgender”) to refer to a person who is not transgender, if there is a need to refer to their gender. Cisgender means you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth.

➔ **Use gender-neutral terms whenever possible.**

- For example, use “firefighter” not “fireman,” “police officer” not “policeman,” “mail carrier” not “mailman,” “server” not “waitress,” “representative” or “congressional

member” not “congressman or congresswoman.”

- Do not mention population when talking about reproductive health care. Our gender work is based in concern for the rights of women and gender-nonconforming people, not population size. Instead, when communicating about our work, use a rights-based frame.
 - For example, “Women have the right to breathe clean air, drink clean water, and

live in a safe and healthy environment, and that includes bodily autonomy and comprehensive reproductive health care. Women feel the burden of climate disruption and toxic pollution and have the right to the tools they need to adapt.”

- Use a rights- and equity-based frame when talking about gender: body autonomy (control over one’s own body), self-determination, right to health, right to health care, right to safety, etc.

COMMON PHRASES TO AVOID

➔ **Avoid patriarchal language such as “not the right man for the job,” “man up,” or “man made.”**

- Try a substitution of gender-neutral language like “right person for the job” or “handmade.”

➔ **Avoid emphasizing the importance of work through women’s relationship to men.**

- For example, “This work is important because the health and safety of our wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters is at stake.”
- Instead talk about all the other reasons it is important to promote gender equity: “This work is important because women’s rights are human rights.”

➔ **Sexualization: Avoid language that is sexualizing of people’s bodies, particularly women’s bodies. We should particularly avoid sexualized descriptions of interview subjects.**

- For example: “The curve of the river echoed the shape of a woman’s body, drawing us all in.”

- Empower: The word “empower” carries the condescending implication that we are giving women, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people their basic right to equality as a gift or magnanimous gesture, rather than those communities taking and owning what is rightfully theirs. This is applicable to all sections of this guide.

- Instead of saying the Sierra Club wants to “empower” certain people or communities, be more specific about what you mean. Are we trying to elevate voices? Offer financial resources so folks can do their own organizing?

➔ **Tolerance: Avoid the frame of “tolerance” of differences. This applies to every section of this guide—we should not be aiming to “tolerate” one another, but rather to celebrate and uplift our differences.**

IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES



The Sierra Club has a [complex history](#) with immigration issues. Today, the Sierra Club tries to be an ally to immigrant communities and supports immigration reform policies that create a path to citizenship for all residents of the U.S. But as recently as the 1990s, people organized within the Sierra Club to push the organization to take explicitly anti-immigrant positions. For this reason, Sierra Club communicators must hold themselves to a very high standard when communicating about immigration, immigrants, and refugees as well as issues facing those communities. By doing so, we can demonstrate the progress we've made as an organization and as a community. To review the Sierra Club's current Board of Directors policy on immigration, see [here](#).

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

- ➔ **Never use the term “illegal” to describe a person. If a person lacks legal permission to live or work in the U.S., you can refer to them as an “un-documented” immigrant or someone with a complex immigration status.**
- ➔ **Avoid referring to “citizens” when possible—every community in the U.S. includes people who are not U.S. citizens. Referring to “residents” or “members” of a community is a more inclusive approach. The term “citizen” is acceptable when discussing “citizen comment periods” or other legal terms that do specifically refer to citizens of the United States.**
- ➔ **Avoid using the term “Americans” generically for a group (because it limits the group to those who have citizenship status as Americans). There may be moments when it is appropriate to utilize this word, but one must first ask whether it is absolutely necessary. Also consider that in Latin America, the identifier “American” is typically used to refer to everyone who hails from the continent.**

THESE TERMS WERE BORROWED FROM THE SUM OF US STYLE GUIDE:

APPROPRIATE TERMS	TERMS AND PHRASES TO AVOID
asylee	alien
asylum seeker	an illegal
children of immigrants	anchor baby
family	ex-pat
foreign national	failed asylum seeker
person	illegal alien
person seeking citizenship	illegal asylum seeker
person with citizenship in...	illegal immigrant
refugee	legal alien
refused asylum seeker	legal citizen
stateless person	legal resident
undocumented immigrant	legalized
	migrant
	natural, naturalized
	resident alien
	second-generation

LABOR AND WORKERS

The Sierra Club has a long history of solidarity with the labor and economic justice movements and is itself a union workplace. But our work to shut down fossil fuel infrastructure often puts us at odds with some sectors of the labor movement. As one of the founders of the BlueGreen Alliance, the Sierra Club has a responsibility to help bridge that divide by demonstrating with our words and

actions that we support a transition to a clean energy economy that creates good, family-supporting union jobs without leaving workers behind. It is critical to our success, and to our humanity, that we show sensitivity to the very real challenges of fossil fuel workers and do everything we can to support a fair and just transition.

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT LABOR AND WORKERS

- ➔ **“Retirement” of coal plants: For workers, hearing about how their plant is “retiring” when their own retirement is probably in jeopardy because of the closure can be painful. This is a euphemism that unhelpfully avoids the reality: The plant is closing. Instead, simply say that the plant will stop burning coal (or gas) on a certain date.**
- For example: “Today the Sierra Club announced that the San Juan Generating Station will stop burning coal and cease operations in 2022.”
 - **Just transition:** The use of this term depends on context. In some parts of the country, environmental justice groups are organizing around the “Just Transition framework” put forth by Movement Generation. Other allies, from Labor Network for Sustainability to the International Trade Union Confederation to the International Labor Organization, have been organizing and advocating for a “just transition,” with different understandings of the meaning and application of the term. It may be important to these allies that the term be used authentically and holistically, and that those of us using the word know what it means and have been showing up for just transition work.
 - But for everyday workers, particularly in coal mining areas like Appalachia and the Powder River Basin, reality has failed to live up to the rhetoric they hear about a “just transition,” so many workers hear the term as “just a fancy funeral” for their jobs. It’s best to avoid “just transition” when fossil fuel workers are your audience—instead talk about prioritizing economic justice. For many fossil fuel industry workers, the very idea of a transition is itself threatening.
 - For example: “As our economy shifts away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy, we need to ensure economic justice for all workers, including access to good, family-sustaining union jobs for fossil fuel workers.”
 - **Worker retraining:** Similar to “just transition,” “worker retraining” is an idea that many workers have been hearing about for years without seeing results. Imagine going through unpaid worker retraining and then finding that there aren’t any relevant jobs in the region where you and your family live. Worker training is an important piece of the policy puzzle that will make economic justice possible in a clean energy economy, but it’s only one piece—if you want to mention worker retraining, be sure to mention other types of investments and policies as well.
 - For example: “As our state’s economy shifts from fossil fuels to clean energy, we need meaningful public sector investments in creating jobs, a commitment to good, family-sustaining union jobs from the clean energy industry, and resources for fossil fuel workers to gain new skills that are sought after in growing industries.”
 - **Celebrating clean energy jobs:** If we are truly committed to building a clean energy economy that works for everyone, we must acknowledge that clean energy jobs are, on average, lower paid and less likely to be unionized than fossil fuel industry jobs. When we celebrate the growth of clean energy jobs without acknowledging that reality, workers just hear hypocrisy. We can lift up the successes of the growing clean energy economy while at the same time putting pressure on clean energy industries to allow unionization and to provide good, family-sustaining jobs to their workers.

- For example: “Utah currently has more than five times as many jobs in the clean energy and energy efficiency sectors than the entire fossil fuel industry. That’s great news for our state, but we also need to ensure that coal miners and other workers whose jobs are disappearing have access to good, family-supporting careers. That means doubling down on creating clean energy jobs and putting pressure on clean energy companies to make

sure they’re providing good jobs at fair wages.”

- **“Good jobs” vs. family-sustaining union jobs:** We should, whenever possible, specify that we are calling on policymakers and job creators to support union jobs, not just ill-defined “good jobs.”
 - For example: “Our state-elected leaders must work to create good, family-sustaining union jobs for workers in our state.”

RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Establishing respectful, mutually accountable practices around race in our communications is one of the most important ways we can put our values into practice when communicating on behalf of the Sierra Club. The key to this work is to, whenever possible, **communicate directly and honestly with the people we are writing about**. Whether we’re ghost-writing an op-ed or drafting a tweet lifting up the voices

of community partners, we should always ask, “How does this person want to be identified and described? Am I naming this person’s racial identity because they prefer to be identified that way, because their identity is a crucial part of the story being told, or because I wish to tokenize their racial identity in order to showcase the Sierra Club’s [‘diversity’](#)?”

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT RACE FROM RACE FORWARD

The folks at [Race Forward](#), which advances racial justice through research, media, and practice, have published an invaluable guide called the [Race Forward Reporting Guide](#). We have collected some of their most relevant recommendations below, but we highly recommend that you [read the whole thing](#). Their influence can be seen throughout this guide, and we offer our thanks to Race Forward for publishing this invaluable resource.

- “Be explicit about race when it is pertinent to a story, fairly (across all racial categories, including identifying persons as “White” when relevant) and appropriately (without relying on stereotypes).
- Ask people about their heritage and strive for respectful accuracy that observes how people self-identify racially and ethnically, and that allows for multiple categories.
- Familiarize yourself with the key terms and concepts of race and ethnicity, and how categories that describe these can intersect (“White Argentine,” “a person of mixed Choctaw and African American descent,” Latinos who identify as “some other race”).
- Avoid “silencing history” by omitting, dismissing, or deliberately rewriting history, which “isolates racial disparities

and attitudes from a historical context and instead presents them as a unique, individual instance. This results in incomplete or inaccurate understandings

of the root causes of these disparities and attitudes and obscures the pathway to illuminate which solutions are most viable or warranted.”

PREFERRED TERMS FOR RACIAL IDENTITY

Whenever possible, ask the person or group you are writing about how they prefer to be identified. In the absence of that information, these are the terms that the Sierra Club uses to refer to some racial and ethnic identities. The Sierra Club capitalizes terms referring to racial and ethnic identities out of respect; this can include [capitalization of “Black.”](#) We recognize that the capitalization of Black is unfamiliar to many audiences and leave it to each communicator to determine what is appropriate for the audience for which they are writing. For many people and communities, capitalization of Black would be jarring without explanation, so many communicators at the Sierra Club will likely continue not to capitalize black but should feel free to do so if they prefer.

- Native American (Tribal when referring to governments, Tribal or Native when referring to communities within U.S. borders, Indigenous in international contexts)
 - Whenever possible, capitalize “Tribe” or “Tribal” as well as “Native” and “Indigenous.” Common use and preference on this varies wildly, and we should prioritize the preferences of the people we are referring to.

But unless there is reason not to, we should capitalize these terms in order to default to a position that expresses respect.

- Asian American/Pacific Islander (ideally refer to a more specific identity when that information is available)
- Black and/or African American
 - Be sure to ask interview subjects and spokespeople how they prefer to be referred to, and note that these terms are not interchangeable, particularly for recent immigrants from Africa living in the U.S.
- white
- Latino
 - Again, be sure to ask and defer to the preferences of the person being described—some people prefer “Hispanic,” but the Sierra Club [defaults](#) to “Latino.” Use of “Latinx” is also appropriate if you deem it culturally correct for your audience. Latinx is a gender-neutral term for Latino/a identity.
- “People of color” can in some cases serve as a collective term for people who are not white.

COMMON PHRASES TO AVOID

- Minority: According to Race Forward, “Defining people of color as ‘minorities’ is not recommended because of changing

demographics and the ways in which it reinforces ideas of inferiority and marginalization of a group of people.”

In some areas, it is also simply becoming inaccurate as population demographics shift.

- When considering a term to use other than “minority,” consider which specific communities you actually mean. Communities of color? Poor and working class communities? Be more specific and you can easily avoid this term.

 **Use caution with terms that may subtly, yet profoundly, evoke and reinforce racial stereotypes, such as “urban,” “vibrant,” and “hardworking.”**

- Instead, just say what you actually mean—and consider whether what you meant to say has embedded stereotypes that should be removed.
- Don’t use geographic descriptors interchangeably with religious or other

terms to describe specific groups of people. For example, “Muslim” is not synonymous with Arab; African American Muslims are the largest Muslim population in the United States.

- **Flesh-toned:** There is no single color that is “flesh-toned.” Many similar common phrases rely on the assumption of whiteness as default, which is an assumption we should challenge whenever we see it.
 - Since there is no single color that represents a human skin tone, you’ll have to rely on another metaphor to describe the color you are referring to.
- **Brown bag:** The term “brown bag,” often used to refer to a bagged lunch, has a [charged racist](#) association that makes it a term to avoid.
 - Instead, consider “working lunch” or “BYO lunch session.”

WRITING ABOUT RACISM AND HATE

We are living in a historical moment wherein it is crucial to resist attempts by far-right extremists to rebrand their hatred as a legitimate political viewpoint. At the Sierra Club, we refer to white supremacy as white supremacy, rather than playing into the strategic choice from extremist conservatives to reframe their movement as the “alt-right.” NPR affiliate KUOW [goes into depth](#) about its choice to avoid the term “alt-right” and the importance of saying what we really mean.

[The Associated Press](#) offers the following definitions of white nationalism and white supremacy:

- White nationalists say that white people are a distinct nation deserving of protection, and therefore they demand

special political, legal, and territorial guarantees for whites.

- White supremacists believe that whites are superior and therefore should dominate other races.

The Sierra Club defaults to using the term “white supremacy” to refer to organized white supremacy and nationalism unless there is a specific reason not to. Though many also use the term “white supremacy” to refer to institutional racism and unconscious bias, which is different than overt, organized white supremacy, many in the public do not understand or react to the term “white nationalism.” White supremacy is the most commonly used and understood term for organized bigotry and violence, so in order

to be clear, that’s the term we prefer to use. It can be useful to introduce the qualifiers “organized,” “open,” or “overt” to make

yourself clear when referring to groups and individuals who espouse white supremacist ideas in the public sphere.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

One way to demonstrate respect for cultures other than one’s own is to recognize religious and cultural traditions other than those of the white Christian culture that dominates the U.S. media landscape. The Sierra Club’s Human Resources department has created this [helpful overview of holidays](#) celebrated by people of all different faiths and cultures. It’s a good idea when scheduling an event like a press conference to check the list to avoid major holidays you might not be aware of. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for example, are some of the most important dates in the Jewish calendar, but because Hanukkah falls near Christmas, that is the holiday that many people of non-Jewish faith and backgrounds recognize and acknowledge.

We should also be cautious about messaging around holidays like Thanksgiving and Columbus Day. The Sierra Club does not celebrate Columbus Day because of its association with and celebration of the genocide of Native peoples. Thanksgiving can be a helpful hook for press coverage, but



be careful not to promote [inaccurate cultural narratives](#) about “the first Thanksgiving.” Some people believe that the first official declaration of a holiday called “Thanksgiving” was a celebration of the [massacre](#) of the Pequot people. But the tradition of giving thanks for a successful harvest dates back millennia and is shared across many cultural traditions—focusing on themes of harvest and gratitude can help to avoid the violent associations that many people have with Thanksgiving.

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY AND PUBLIC LANDS

There are more than 500 distinct Tribal nations within the borders of the United States, each with a unique culture, history, and identity. In order to build true partnerships, we must consider these distinct identities and strive always to respect cultural sensitivities.

There are general rules to observe when engaging with Native nations, but it is especially important to be attentive to the specific lived experience of each Tribal nation and individual.

TIPS ON WRITING ABOUT TRIBAL NATIONS

- Whenever possible, capitalize “Tribe” or “Tribal” as well as “Native” and “Indigenous.” Common use and preference on this varies wildly, and we should prioritize the preferences of the people we are referring to. But unless there is reason not to, we should capitalize these terms in order to default to a position that expresses respect.

 **When referring to a Tribal nation, we should refer to the specific nation (Dine, Cheyenne, Nooksack, etc.), not “Tribes” generally. Though Native nations are often generalized in collective terminology (Native, Indigenous nations, Indigenous peoples, Native American, American Indian), it is best to refer specifically to the nation.**

- For example, a title might read “Lummi Nation fights to preserve treaty

rights against a proposed coal export terminal’s attacks” instead of “Tribe comes out against coal terminal.”

- Generally speaking, the Sierra Club uses “Tribal” to refer to Native peoples in a U.S. context and “Indigenous” in an international context. “Native” can be used in either context but should always be qualified by “people” or “peoples.”
- Avoid framing that implies that Tribal rights are “given” to Tribes. The federal government does not “give” Tribal nations anything. Through treaties, Tribes ceded their traditional homelands and other properties and rights. The land Tribes reserved for themselves to continue living upon are called “reservations” for a reason. Any benefits Tribal members receive come from treaty rights in exchange for non-Native people to make their homes on Tribal lands and use their resources.

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECTING TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

Understanding Tribal sovereignty and treaty rights is a must and also presents an opportunity to relay important messaging. Tribes are sovereign nations, and Tribal sovereignty reflects a nation’s ability to self-determine, which is a fundamental right. The nation-to-nation relationship between Tribal nations and the federal government is codified into law, including the highest law of the land.

Treaties are compacts between two nations, typically foreign nations. Article 6, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution defines treaties as “the supreme law of the land,” on a par with the Constitution of the United States itself. Thus, Tribal treaties take precedence over any conflicting state law. This is often misunderstood, and we should do our part to spread this important message.

THE PROBLEMATIC HISTORY OF CONSERVATION AND “PUBLIC LANDS”

Best practices for dealing respectfully with Tribal nations begin with listening, humility, and understanding. Understand that Tribal nations are not a monolith—different nations

have different interests. Additionally, as with any nation, differences of opinion exist within Tribal nations, and individual members should not be taken as speaking for everyone within

their communities. We must listen, respect differences as well as similarities, and start where the community is when working in collaboration. We must authentically listen to Tribal interests to find points of collaboration, and refrain from speaking for Tribal partners.

In building relationships, time and care must be taken. We have to understand the economic realities faced by Tribal nations, many of which have historic dependence on extraction industries. It also is important to understand that the conservation movement has engaged in activities harmful to the interests of Native people. This has extended to elements within the Sierra Club as well.

One relevant example: The national Sierra Club, along with Friends of the Earth and other environmental orgs, opposed a land-transfer deal in the early 1970s that would have changed the configuration of the Havasupai reservation, which is within the boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park. The concern was based on studies that suggested the Havasupai wanted to use the land to build a tramway from the rim to the base of the canyon.

The Arizona chapter of the Sierra Club was uncomfortable opposing the Havasupai and met with them directly. It turns out that the Havasupai had no intention of building a tramway, or anything else, and were happy to enter into an agreement stating so. Subsequently, the Sierra Club's Board of Directors voted to support the transfer, and the deal ultimately went through. Episodes like this, where elements of the conservation movement can be perceived as opposing Native interests, may have left lasting impressions in certain communities.

To move forward, we have to acknowledge past missteps—and the consequences of these missteps. Some Tribal members and Tribal nations are skeptical of “public lands” rhetoric. Given the history of land theft from Tribes, government misdeeds toward Tribal nations, and broken promises, this is understandable. This does not mean that we should refrain from trying to protect public lands, especially in conjunction with Tribal partners. It does mean we should listen to the concerns of Tribal nations and be prepared for and not defensive about these critiques.

COMMON PHRASES TO AVOID

- ➔ **“On the rez”:** The term “rez” (meaning reservation) should never be used by the Sierra Club. Many slang terms that are used in a particular community are welcome within that community, but not appropriate for use by people who are not members of that community.
- Instead, say “on the Navajo Nation” or other specific place name.

- ➔ **Other slang terms referring to Native history** should also not be used in order to avoid trivializing the violent taking of Native lands or appropriating Native culture. Examples include “low on the totem pole,” “let’s powwow,” and “circle the wagons.”
- ➔ **“Indian” or “Indian Country”:** Similarly, though many Tribal peoples may use

“Indian” to refer to themselves, the Sierra Club is not a Tribal organization and should default to using a more formal, respectful term like “Tribal” or “Native.”

If someone wishes to be identified as “Indian,” we should refer to them as “self-identified” (e.g., self-identified Indian activist).

FURTHER RESOURCES

If you are writing about and working with Tribal nations, spend some time learning about the history and culture of those peoples by doing your own research. Also watch this

Sierra Club webinar, [“Working With Tribal Nations,”](#) by Nellis Kennedy-Howard, Thomas Pearce, Robert Tohe, and Mike Scott.

VIOLENCE AND GUNS

For communicators trying to show the excitement of certain Sierra Club actions or the threat of actions we oppose, one might find it easiest to use words and phrases related to gun violence or other forms of violence. Yet despite the common usage of

these terms, we must be aware of who can be affected by them—the survivors of that violence.

Gun violence and domestic violence affect millions of people. Let’s be aware of how our words impact them.

WAR AND MILITARY SERVICE

Another common practice communicators fall into is using violent war metaphors that sound commonplace but mean something very different to people who have experienced war. Almost all of us have talked about legislative “battles” or said we were “in the trenches” on a particular issue, but only a select few have ever experienced such things firsthand.

The sacrifice of generations of military service members and their loved ones is immense, and utilizing this language in reference to our work is disrespectful to those who have lived this sacrifice. It also risks making our work seem illegitimate to many readers, viewers, and listeners—especially those who have

served in uniform and to civilians who are survivors of war and conflict.

Additionally, the polarizing “us vs. them” language is counterproductive—the truth is we need everyone on board to address this global challenge.

Some terms included here may be acceptable when referring to actual events, rather than when used figuratively. For example, “Under the Gun” is an appropriate title for a story about Berta Caceres’s assassination because the violence referred to is real and literal, so referring to it does not serve to minimize actual violence.

COMMON PHRASES TO AVOID

- “Pull the trigger”
 - Instead try “go for it”
- “Locked and loaded”
 - Instead try “ready to go”
- “Bullet-proof”
 - Instead try “untouchable” or “guaranteed to succeed”
- “Smoking gun”
 - Instead try “incontrovertible evidence” or “damning facts of the case”
- “Dropped a bomb”
 - Instead try “flipped the board” or “changed the rules”
- “Chokehold”
 - Instead try “under their thumb” or “trapped”
- “Rape of the (earth, land, etc.)”
 - Instead try “desecration of” or “violation of”
- “Battle/battleground”
 - Instead try “struggle” or “debate”
- “Climate brigade/troops”
 - Instead try “united movement for climate justice” or “climate defenders”
- “A day that will live in infamy”
 - Instead try “a day that history will remember” or “history has its eyes on you”
- “Boots on the ground”
 - Instead try “people on our side”
- “Under fire”
 - Instead try “barraged with calls” or “unfairly criticized”
- “Hill to die on”
 - Instead try “top priority”
- “Minefield”
 - Instead try “complex situation”

VISUAL IMAGERY

Just like we’re thoughtful and intentional with our words, we should put intention and care into the images we’re using. It can be challenging to avoid tokenizing people with imagery while at the same time representing

the full diversity of communities in which we work and live. We can meet this challenge by prioritizing authenticity and pushing ourselves to collect and use real images of real people doing work that they care about.

PEER REVIEW

Any image that will be viewed by a large number of people (for example, the Sierra Club’s social media audience) ideally should be reviewed by at least one other person before posting or publishing to ensure that the image fits within the following guidelines.

PHOTO CHOICE AND TOKENIZATION

Sierra Club imagery should accurately mirror the population of the United States without bias. When choosing photos, consider different ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, genders, ages (but note that anyone under 18 requires a minor release), religions, and disabilities in the context of everyday life. For an article about a national monument action, could the imagery be of a person in a wheelchair enjoying the scenery? When we showcase images of families, are we representing all kinds of families, or reproducing dated expectations of what a family looks like?

Avoid perpetuating stereotypes. For example, Sierra magazine featured several articles in

a short period of time about people of color who were in jail or recently released—not ideal—but for a cover story about eating bugs, the Art department wisely chose not to use an image of an African American individual on the cover (especially because African Americans had been underrepresented on covers in the past).

Be sensitive to people’s immigration status by communicating directly with folks who are depicted in imagery concerning immigration. Just because someone was photographed at a pro-immigration event doesn’t mean they are ready to be “outed” as an undocumented immigrant in a prominent public forum like Sierra magazine or our Twitter account.

PHOTOGRAPHERS

To ensure an accurate portrayal, whenever possible use photographs taken by people familiar with the subject (e.g., a Navajo photographer’s image of a Navajo ceremony).

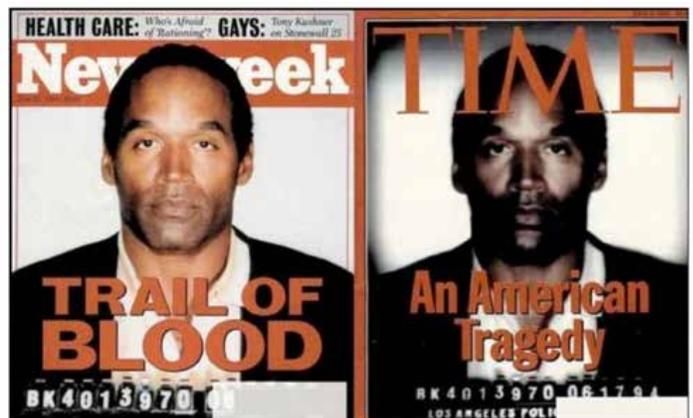
When hiring photographers, make sure they

represent the Sierra Club positively and will not tarnish our reputation. Photographers should always be respectful of the communities in which they’re photographing and not be pushy or disruptive.

PHOTO ALTERATION/MANIPULATION

➔ **Photos should not be manipulated or adjusted beyond what can be done in a darkroom (color enhancements, cropping, minor lightening/darkening). Avoid altering a person’s coloring or physical appearance.**

Here is an example of unacceptable post-production enhancement:



WHITEWASHING HISTORY

Just like our nation, the Sierra Club has a complex history. When we attempt to paper over historical (or current) injustice, we risk

alienating people who are understandably sensitive to the violence that underpins U.S. history.

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT U.S. HISTORY

- **Founding Fathers:** We often refer to our “Founding Fathers” and their values around justice and equality, or religious freedom, without also acknowledging the reality that many of the founders of the United States enslaved human beings. When we use messaging that assumes this rosy picture of early U.S. history, we must recognize that our message may be received very differently than intended by people who are the descendants of people who were enslaved, or Native peoples killed for their lands.
- **“Our” Public Lands:** Though some Native groups and communities themselves use rhetoric like “protect our public lands,” we should be aware of how fraught ownership language is for many Native people. For someone whose family was forcibly removed from the Tribal lands that are now known as Yosemite National Park, for example, the claim that public lands “are the birthright of every American,” or that “national parks are America’s greatest idea” could be deeply upsetting. Simply acknowledging specific Native peoples as the original stewards of lands we are writing about can help us to avoid whitewashing history.
- **Slavery:** When referring to a person who was enslaved, we should say “enslaved person” rather than “slave.” Slavery doesn’t just happen; it’s not a natural condition of human beings. Referring to someone as a “slave” diminishes their humanity and fails to place the agency for their enslavement where it belongs: with the people who enslaved them.

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