

ATTRACTING DIVERSE TALENT

A GUIDE FOR WRITING INCLUSIVE
PHD PROJECT ADVERTS

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2023



What is inclusive language and why is it important?

Language is a powerful tool. It can be used to express a sense of inclusivity and belonging, but can also encode biases that exclude certain groups of people. The language used in recruitment materials offers applicants their first view into organisational culture, and provides the first opportunity for them to establish a perceived fit and determine if they would like to become a part of the organisation.



Use of inclusive language can convey the organisation's commitment to diversity, and allow prospective applicants to establish a perceived fit and a sense of belonging that would encourage them to submit an application.

Exclusionary language on the other hand can prevent certain groups from establishing a perceived fit and sense of belonging, and discourage prospective applicants from such groups from submitting an application.



Attracting a more diverse pool of applicants will aid you in recruiting the student with the best talent and potential to your project, and will benefit your lab and research groups. Creating a diverse lab or research group results in a team that is better at problem solving*, and that can come up with more creative and innovative ideas, methods, and solutions‡.

When writing your PhD project advert, you may not notice that the language you use can be off-putting and exclusionary to certain groups of prospective applicants. Some exclusionary wording in adverts can be imperceptible† and both you and the prospective applicant may not explicitly notice the language, despite its exclusionary effects. There is also a difference between speaker-oriented inferences and addressee-oriented inferences - what you intend to communicate to prospective applicants with your project advert may not be the same

* **Hong & Page**, 2004, 'Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers', *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 101:16385-16389.

‡ **Medin & Lee**, 2012, 'Diversity Makes Better Science', *Association for Psychological Science* 25(5).

† **Gaucher, Friesen & Kay**, 2011, 'Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101:109-128. Page 120.

information they take from it. Where you do not explicitly communicate or underspecify, the addressee has to infer what you mean from the information given*. For example, you may provide the information that ‘lab skills’ are an essential criteria for your project. From the rest of your advert the prospective applicant may infer which of their skills developed in a laboratory environment are relevant, but they will not know exactly which skills you had in mind. Different people have different world experiences, and different background contextual information about doing a PhD and the PhD application process, thus may not infer what you intend them to take away from the information you provide.

This guide will help you to consider the impact of the language you use, and to write your PhD project advert in a way that is inclusive and welcoming to applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds.

***Grodner & Sedivy**, 2011, ‘The Effect of Speaker-Specific Information on Pragmatic Inferences’, in Gibson & Pearlmuter (eds), *Processing And Acquisition Of Reference*: 239-271. Page 239.

Moechler, 2013, ‘Is a Speaker-based Pragmatics Possible? Or How Can a Hearer Infer a Speaker’s Commitment?’, *Journal of Pragmatics* 48:84-97. Page 85.



Summary guide



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Include EDI related statements within your project description



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Highlight the benefits a student would experience with your project



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Provide a balance between expectations of, and benefits to, the successful applicant



pg.8

Consider alternative project structures with less/no fieldwork



pg.8

Include details of physically challenging fieldwork aspects



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Keep your list of essential criteria short and specific

pg.6



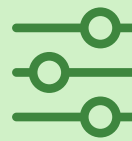
Ask for demonstrable experience of learning new skills



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Ask for relevant transferable skills

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Avoid referring to 'ability' to do fieldwork and note the availability of reasonable adjustments

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Use relational language in place of hyperbole and redundant/ambiguous descriptors



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Use gender decoder tools to check for gendered language bias



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Replace male-coded language with neutral or female-coded synonyms



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Ensure any degree requirement information you provide matches the ACCE entry requirements

pg.11



Use second person pronouns (you/your) to refer to the applicant

EDI related language

Research has found that less than 5% of the language used in recruitment communications related to EDI, demonstrating a lack of commitment to core EDI values*. When your project is advertised, the ACCE DTP will add an EDI statement to the top of your project advert, along with various information either side of your project description to attract and support a diverse range of candidates.

To improve the inclusivity of your advert further you may wish to include EDI related statements within your project description, which can help demonstrate the supervisory team's commitment to EDI, on top of that of the ACCE DTP as a whole. This can be most effective when statements of encouragement[‡] are used. These actively engage with prospective applicants and overtly welcome them to apply.

Example statements of encouragement

- We welcome applications from everyone, regardless of the categories they put themselves in.
- We welcome applicants from all backgrounds.

If/then style statements:

- If interested in becoming part of something greater, apply today!
- If you are interested in joining a diverse and vibrant research team, we welcome your application.
- If you want to learn/research XXXX, we want to hear from you!

You may also wish to highlight the benefits a student would experience by choosing your project. For example, ask yourself:

- What skills would they receive training in?
- What kind of great support is available from your supervisory team/research group/lab?
- Is there support available for a range of career paths, including outside of academia?
- Has your supervision/support/team led to successful outcomes (career-related, publications, awards etc.) for previous students?

* **STEMM Change**, 2021, *Towards Diverse Workforces: Transforming the Language of Exclusion and Bias in Recruitment*. Page 10.

‡ **STEMM Change**, 2021, *Towards Diverse Workforces: Transforming the Language of Exclusion and Bias in Recruitment*. Page 11.

Entry requirements

If you intend to include degree requirements within your expectations of the applicant, please ensure these match the ACCE entry requirements:



The ACCE DTP Universities (Liverpool, Sheffield and York) generally require the equivalent of a minimum 2:1 in your first degree, but exceptions can be made where applicants can demonstrate excellence in alternative ways. At ACCE we recognise that there are many ways to show excellence (including, but not restricted to, performance in masters courses, internships or employment). We are happy to consider applications from candidates with lower than a 2:1 award where excellence can be demonstrated in other ways – this would be considered on a case by case basis, and dependent upon approval from the relevant host institution.



Essential and desirable criteria

Studies have shown that certain groups, such as women, are less likely to apply for a job unless they meet 100% of the requirements, while others, such as men, will apply if they meet 60% of the requirements*. Long lists of essential criteria can thus discourage groups such as women from applying, as there are more criteria they have to meet. Keeping your criteria lists short can make sure they are not deterring prospective applicants from submitting an application. You could do this by removing any skills that you can reasonably provide training for, or list these as desirable criteria instead. Another option is to focus on potential[‡] by asking for demonstrable experience of learning new skills, to find out if an applicant would be able to learn the necessary skills within the 3.5 year timeframe of the PhD funded period. You may also also ask for evidence of relevant transferable skills within the essential or desirable criteria, such as project

* **Clark**, 2014, 'Act Now to Shrink the Confidence Gap', *Forbes* 28th April.

Mohr, 2014, 'Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified', *Harvard Business Review* 25th August.

[‡] This relates to another area of bias – experiments with regard to promotions have found that people value leadership potential over performance for men, but leadership performance over potential for women. (**Player et al.**, 2019, 'Overlooked Leadership Potential: The Preference for Leadership Potential in Job Candidates Who are Men vs. Women', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10: Article 755.)

management or problem solving, to include those with experience outside the traditional academic background.

Essential and desirable criteria can be at risk of containing hyperbolic language, which exaggerate expectations of prospective applicants, and redundant or ambiguous descriptions, which add little value and produce a vagueness with respect to measurement of a skill, knowledge, or experience*. This makes it difficult for prospective applicants to conceptualise fit and determine role/project suitability. A common example of this is exaggerated descriptions and vague classifiers linked with an important skill, for example ‘strong quantitative skills’, or ‘extensive fieldwork experience’. Examples of hyperbolic and redundant descriptions include:

Considerable	Extensive	Outstanding
Effective	High quality	Significant
Excellent	Highest standard	Strong
Exceptionally	Highly proficient	Superior

You can improve inclusivity in essential and desirable criteria by using ‘relational language’, which allows the prospective applicant to interpret the role with respect to their own experiences. For example:

Demonstrable ability to
Evidence of
Familiarity with
Equivalent experience
Relevant background

Try to also be specific with the skills or experience you ask for. This will allow the prospective applicant to gauge their fit to what you are looking for better than vague, overarching statements.



* **STEMM Change**, 2021, *Towards Diverse Workforces: Transforming the Language of Exclusion and Bias in Recruitment*. Page 14.

Expectations and benefits

Using both the project description and the essential and desirable criteria lists, try to reach a balance between your expectations of the applicant (e.g. their current skills, knowledge, and experience) and what the applicant will gain from you (e.g. skills and knowledge they will learn, and experience they will gain). For example, you could express your expectations of the applicant within the essential and desirable criteria and the benefits the appointed student will gain within the project description. This is key to ensure each prospective applicant is aware of both what they need to demonstrate in their application, and why they should apply to your project in particular.

Fieldwork

When listing fieldwork as an essential or desirable criteria, don't refer to 'ability to do fieldwork'. This is exclusionary to prospective applicants with certain disabilities who may not be 'able' to do fieldwork. Instead you could ask for demonstrable experience of fieldwork or particular relevant skills.

Additionally, the information that reasonable adjustments are available should be included if your project contains a fieldwork element. If needed, there is support available for the costs of non-medical helpers for disabled students through the disabled students' allowance (DSA), so if the project was filled by a student who was unable to carry out the fieldwork due to a disability, they may be able to pay for a technician with funding from the DSA*. If there are any aspects of the fieldwork that could be physically challenging, include details to allow applicants to determine what would be a realistic option for them.

You may also wish to consider alternative methods of carrying out the project with less or no fieldwork, which could be discussed with prospective applicants dependent on their needs and required reasonable adjustments.



* The relevance of this and support available would be dependent on the student that was recruited and their unique reasonable adjustment needs (if applicable).

Gendered language

One of the best understood areas of exclusionary language is gendered language, and as a result there are various tools available to check your text for language which may be off-putting to prospective applicants.

Gendered language relates to social gender, which refers to ‘the socially imposed dichotomy of masculine and feminine roles and character traits’*. Women are generally considered to be more communal and nurturant[‡] while men are perceived as more agentic and associated with leadership traits[†].

In order to research gendered wording in job adverts, lists of male- and female-coded words were created** using existing lists of agentic and communal words[‡], and masculine and feminine trait words^{††}. The resulting research has found that, in comparison to adverts with high proportions of female-coded language, women find job adverts with high proportions of male-coded language less appealing and report a lower sense of anticipated belonging. For men gendered wording has no effect on anticipated belongingness, and adverts with higher proportions of male-coded language are only marginally more appealing than those with high proportions of female-coded language or neutral adverts. This is the case regardless of whether the occupation is typically female or male dominated.

Additionally, job advertisements for occupations and university faculties which are typically male-dominated contain more male-coded language than those which are typically female-dominated. As a result, male-coded language in advertisements serves to keep women excluded from fields that men typically dominate***.

* **Kramarae & Treichler**, 1985. *A Feminist Dictionary*. Page 173.

Hellinger & Motschenbacher, 2015, *Gender Across Languages. Vol.4*. Page 10-11.

‡ **Oyerman & Marcus**, 1998, ‘Self as social representation’, in Flick (ed.), *The Psychology of the Social*:107-125. Page 121.

† **Gaucher, Friesen & Kay**, 2011, ‘Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101:109-128. Page 110-111.

** **Gaucher, Friesen & Kay**, 2011, ‘Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101:109-128. Page 113 & 125.

‡‡ **Bartz & Lydon**, 2004, ‘Close Relationships and the Working Self-Concept: Implicit and Explicit Effects of Priming Attachment on Agency and Communion’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30:1389-1401.

Rudman & Kilianski, 2000, ‘Implicit and Explicit Attitudes toward Female Authority’ *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26:1315-1328.

†† **Bem**, 1974, ‘The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 42:155-162.

Hoffman & Hurst, 1990, ‘Gender Stereotypes: Perception or Rationalization?’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58:197-208.

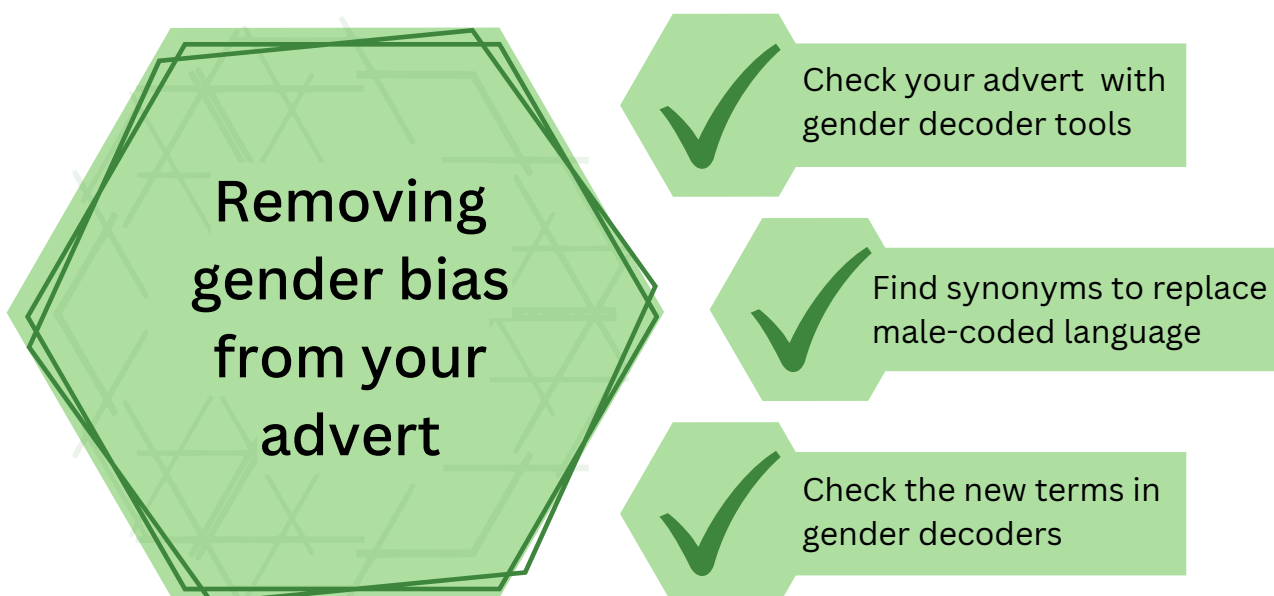
Schullo & Alperson, 1984, ‘Interpersonal Phenomenology as a Function of Sexual Orientation, Sex, Sentiment, and Trait Categories in Long-Term Dyadic Relationships’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47:983-1002.

*** **Gaucher, Friesen & Kay**, 2011, ‘Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101:109-128. Page 114-118.

There are various tools available to check your advert for male-coded language. A web search for ‘gender bias decoder’ will provide you with multiple options, many of which are based on the [Kat Matfield gender decoder](#), which provides a list of the words in your text which are male- or female-coded. An alternative tool, the [Total Jobs gender bias decoder](#), will highlight male- and female-coded words within the text, and also provides alternatives for male-coded words. However, this does not always pick up as many of the male-coded words in an advert as the Kat Matfield decoder, so for the most benefit it can be worth checking your advert in both tools.

If the gender bias decoder you use does not give an alternative replacement for a male-coded word, or those given are not suitable, use a search engine or check a thesaurus to find synonyms, but don’t forget to check your new word with a gender decoder tool too!

Your advert may contain some words which are flagged as male-coded, but refer to a specific technique, e.g. ‘analysis’ in ‘time series analysis’; ‘stable isotope analysis’; ‘spatial analysis’. If there is no suitable alternative means of expressing this, and you cannot remove the word, try to add some female-coded words within your advert to neutralise it, and reduce the adverse effects of the male-coded language. Additionally, try to keep any male-coded language within descriptions of techniques, rather than of the person themselves, e.g. ‘demonstrable data analysis skills’ rather than ‘analytical mind’.



Second person pronouns

Use of second person pronouns (you/your) enables direct engagement and more dialogic communication with prospective applicants, without excluding applicants of any particular gender. This can help establish a good rapport with prospective applicants right from the beginning of their application journey. Addressing prospective applicants directly through the use of second person pronouns can also help them to envision themselves in the role before they apply, something which is particularly key for improving inclusivity.

Research has found that recruitment language in higher education institutions is significantly more formal than in industry*. The use of formal language creates a distancing effect between you and your prospective student. The use of second person pronouns in place of terms such as ‘the ideal student’ or ‘the applicant’, and the first person plural ‘we’ in place of terms such as ‘the research group’ or ‘the supervisory team’ makes applying a more personalised and inclusive process. A change in formality and engaging directly with prospective applicants reduces the social distance between you and your prospective student, and is likely to be more appealing to underrepresented groups.

Further inclusive language resources

- [HubSpot: Inclusive Language: How To Use and Promote It at Your Organization](#)
- [Inclusion Hub: How to Create Inclusive Job Descriptions](#)
- [Indeed: Inclusive Language in the Recruiting Process](#)
- [Oxfam: Inclusive Language Guide](#)
- [Sage: Inclusive Language Guide](#)
- [STEMM Change: Transforming the Language of Exclusion and Bias in Recruitment](#)
- [University College London: Using Inclusive Language in Education](#)
- [University of Leeds: Inclusive Language Guidance](#)



* **STEMM Change**, 2021, *Towards Diverse Workforces: Transforming the Language of Exclusion and Bias in Recruitment*. Page 18.