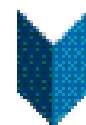


RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES HANDBOOK

JANUARY, 2026



MOUNT
ROYAL
UNIVERSITY

WHY A BEST PRACTICES HANDBOOK?

MRU audiences and community members expect transparent, accessible and meaningful information in all interactions with the University. To build an authentic and accountable brand, materials must be backed by actions and behaviours. We must live the values of being a campus community that is inclusive and respectful of all members.

PERFORMATIVE VERSUS ACCOUNTABLE

Performative marketing is about portraying an image for promotion even if it does not align with the actions and behaviours of the organization. When a business posts about specific causes or social movements that they are not involved in, but demonstrate support for, to capitalize on being a part of a larger conversation, they are using performative marketing. In performative marketing and communications there is often a disconnect between the “real” experience of the organization and how that organization portrays itself through marketing and communications.

Authentic and accountable marketing and communications reflects genuine experiences. At MRU we aim to be a campus where all community members feel accepted, respected and valued. To ensure MRU is taking action and using inclusive language, guidelines and mechanisms are in place that hold our institution accountable for how we portray ourselves.

The marketing and communications of MRU reflect Mount Royal’s strategic focus on community engagement and belonging.

This handbook is an evergreen document created in consultation with key campus areas and experts, including the Department of Community Engagement, the Office of Community and Belonging, the Office of Indigenization and Decolonization and Access and Inclusion Services, among others. It is reviewed annually and approved by the Department of Community Engagement. It is a resource for all of MRU that provides direction and actionable items for day-to-day communication activities.

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INCLUSIVE WRITING GUIDELINES

Inclusive language means paying attention to the ways that language can be, and has been, used to exclude people or groups of people — whether intentionally or unintentionally. This is not an exhaustive list but is meant to help all writers/communicators at MRU to be prepared and think more intentionally about the words you choose. Appropriate terminology changes often, so it may be necessary to double-check.

RACIALIZED PERSONS

Remember that race is a social construct commonly leveraged to categorize and oppress people. Only include information about a person's identity if relevant to the content or context. If necessary, always ask for a group or individual's preference regarding terminology and vocabulary. Never name an individual's racial identity or religion, etc., without their permission.

Avoid singling out specific cultures or drawing unnecessary attention to ethnic or racial backgrounds. When references are relevant and necessary, find the appropriate, accepted terminology and use the language the individual or group prefers to describe themselves. It's a good idea to provide historical context when using unfamiliar or unusual terms, such as "indigenization" and "equity-deserving."

Avoid

- » The term "race." Use "racial" or "racial identity" instead.
- » Terms such as "visible minority," "ethnic person," "coloured person/people"
- » Hyphens in multi-word names (e.g., Asian-Canadian)
- » Non-parallel designations (e.g., "African Americans and Asian Americans")
- » Language that essentializes or portrays human groups monolithically (e.g., "the Black race")
- » Use of racial, ethnic or other slurs, even in an academic setting (e.g., lectures or publications)

GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

Only include information about people's sexual orientation and/or gender identity with their consent. If gender is relevant to your topic, make it visible in your writing or content. But if your topic has nothing to do with a specific gender, make it invisible (genderless).

Mount Royal uses 2SLGBTQIA+ to represent all members of the queer community.

Use inclusive, gender-neutral terms wherever possible. When communicating with larger audiences, use "people," "students," or "esteemed guests" instead of "men and women" or "ladies and gentlemen."

ADDITIONAL GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE OPTIONS

Use the pronoun "one."

Example: "An employee with optional critical illness coverage pays more in benefit premiums than one would without this coverage." vs. "An employee with optional critical illness coverage pays more in benefit premiums than he or she would without this coverage."

Use the relative pronoun "who."

Example: "An employee who is not satisfied with current flexible work arrangements may consider applying for the Hybrid Work Program." vs. "If an employee is not satisfied with current flexible work arrangements, he or she may consider applying for the Hybrid Work Program."

Omit the gendered word(s).

Example: "A person must have worked in this position for at least three months in order to become eligible for Sun Life benefits." vs. "A person must have worked in this position for at least three months before he or she becomes eligible for Sun Life benefits."

Avoid

- » Language that assumes a person's gender when it can't be established beforehand. Instead, use "they/their/them" as gender-neutral singular pronouns.
- » Assumptions about gender within relationship roles (e.g., husband/wife or mother/father). Instead, use more inclusive terms such as "partner," "spouse," "parents" and "caregivers."
- » Limiting gender to a male-female binary such as in the concept of "opposite sex" or "opposite gender." Instead, use "a different gender" or "another gender."

See the 'Pronouns' section on page 11 for full information.

Tip: How do I know if I am using discriminatory gendered language?

Reverse the gender: Would reversing the designation or the term from masculine to feminine or neutral (or vice versa) change the meaning or emphasis of the sentence? Would it make the sentence sound odd? For example:

*"Women should not seek out leadership positions."
"Men cannot do two things at the same time."*

Instead use non-gendered language such as:

"People should not have to pay on dates."

If the sentence still makes sense/sounds appropriate after changing the adjective to one describing the dominant group it is likely not discriminatory.

PERSON-FIRST AND IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

Use "identity-first" language — *"person with disabilities," "person with visual impairment," "people with a mental illness," "persons experiencing homelessness."*

Note: As "house" and "home" are different concepts, "unhoused," "unsheltered," "housing-deprived" and others are becoming more common.

Some individuals, however, prefer identity-first language (e.g., autistic person, deaf person). When possible, ask individuals or communities their preference and follow that. Only make mention of an individual's disability when relevant and necessary.

Person-first language	Identity-first language
A person with a disability	A disabled person
A person who is deaf	A deaf person
A person who is blind	A blind person

Source: *Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability*

Capitalize a group name when stressing the fact that they are a cultural community (e.g., Deaf culture); however, when referring only to the disability itself, lower case should be used (e.g. a person who is deaf, a deaf person or the deaf community).

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

Everyday words like "crazy," "insane" or "mad" are often used to describe ideas, situations or behaviour. Even when not directed at a person, these terms can reinforce stigma around mental illness and contribute to an environment that feels less inclusive for people living with mental-health conditions. Instead, try using neutral and descriptive language to convey surprise, difficulty or intensity.

Stigmatizing	Respectful
It drives me crazy.	It bothers/annoys/frustrates me.
This is nuts.	This is interesting/strange/peculiar/funny.
This individual suffers from depression.	They live with/are experiencing depression.
Mentally ill or insane person	Person living with a mental-health issue or illness
Committed suicide, successful suicide	Died by suicide
Failed or unsuccessful suicide attempt	Attempted suicide
Substance abuse	Substance use or substance use disorder
Everyone who is a junkie	Everyone with a substance use disorder
They used to be an addict	They are in recovery

Source: Mental Health Commission of Canada

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AROUND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

When speaking about a person’s socioeconomic status such as low income, avoid using “poor,” “impoverished,” “underprivileged,” “poverty-stricken,” “disadvantaged” or “vulnerable”. Instead, use “made vulnerable by systems.”

Terms to avoid	Suggested alternatives	Comments
The poor Low-class people Poor people	People whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold People who self-reported incomes were in the lowest income bracket	Many people find the terms “low-class” and “poor” pejorative. Use person-first language instead. Define income brackets and levels, if possible.
Working poor	Hardworking, working hard to make ends meet	“Working poor” has negative associations with it and blames low-income people on themselves
The hungry	Food insecurity, food poverty and hunger	Describe their lack of access to food, rather than defining people by their traits.
Homeless people or “the homeless”	People experiencing homelessness Unhoused people Houseless	The term “homeless” is increasingly used in a way where it implies someone is dangerous or devious, and becomes inseparable from a “toxic narrative” that blames and demonizes unhoused people.

Source: Pratt Institute Libraries

MRU-SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

MRU has adopted specific inclusive terminology to communicate consistently. This is not an exhaustive list.

MRU will not use BIPOC, which is an acronym for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. It was intended to emphasize the unique histories of Black and Indigenous Peoples but unfortunately has become a tool to homogenize all non-white communities.

If the content is only talking about Black people, use Black instead of BIPOC. If the main focus is on Indigenous people, use Indigenous instead of BIPOC. If talking only about these two specific groups of people use Black and Indigenous instead of BIPOC.

All-gender washrooms

Black: capitalized when referring to people.

Decolonize, decolonization: the process of identifying and changing policies, structures and practices rooted in colonial systems. In a university context, this can mean addressing power imbalances, challenging assumptions embedded in Western paradigms and working toward more equitable relationships with Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing.

Equity-denied: there are many terms used such as marginalized, racialized and equity-seeking when describing various groups of people who have been oppressed. MRU chooses to use the term equity-denied.

Elder: capitalized when preceding a name and any designation, such as Elder Miiksika'am

Indigenous: (capitalized) a generalized term that is best used when a nation is not known. Best practice is to refer to a person by their nation, such as the Siksika Nation, Piikani Nation and Kainai Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina Nation, the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Goodstoney Nations of the Îethka Stoney Nakoda, and the Métis.

indigenization: not capitalized in a sentence and involves centring Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and experiences in a university's programs, policies, and practices. It includes creating space for Indigenous worldviews to shape decision-making and teaching, while supporting Indigenous students, employees and communities in ways that honour their identities and goals.

Lived experience: personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement as a member of an equity-denied community.

2SLGBTQIA+: Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual community.

Queer and queer community: "Queer" is an umbrella term for people who identify as not heterosexual or not cisgender.

White: lowercase when referring to a white person.

PRONOUNS

Using someone's correct personal pronouns is foundational to respectful communication. When people make assumptions about the gender of another person based on the person's appearance, voice, name and/or behaviours, these assumptions aren't always correct and can cause harm or trauma. In fact, deliberate misgendering (i.e. referring to a person using terms or pronouns that do not align with the person's affirmed gender) is an example of harassment under [Occupational Health and Safety legislation](#).

Note: It is best practice to avoid using honorifics and formal prefixes. In general, these are not necessary and are heavily gendered. Do not use "Mr., Ms., Miss, Mrs." or "Sir, Madam, Ma'am" or "Young man, Young lady" in your communications. Instead, use one's preferred first name or full name.

Exceptions at MRU in our context would be "Dr." or "Professor" when referring to faculty members.

Invite or encourage people to share their pronouns, but do not force people to share their pronouns.

PROPER USE OF PRONOUNS

She/Her: "She is a writer and wrote that book herself. Those ideas are hers. I like both her and her ideas."

He/Him: "He is a writer and wrote that book himself. Those ideas are his. I like both him and his ideas."

They/Them: "They are a writer and wrote that book themselves. Those ideas are theirs. I like both them and their ideas." Note: Although "they" pronouns here are singular and refer to an individual, the verbs are conjugated the same as with the plural "they" (e.g. "they are"). Also note that in this singular pronoun set many use "themselves" rather than "themselves," although both are typically acceptable.

Multiple pronouns, e.g. They/She, He/They: Alternate pronouns from sentence to sentence when referring to someone who uses multiple pronouns. For a person whose pronouns are They/She, you would alternate by using combinations of "they, them, theirs" and "she, her, hers." Example: "They are a writer and wrote that book herself. Those ideas are theirs. I like both her and their ideas."

No pronouns: Use the person's name. Example for someone named Lan: "Lan is a writer and wrote that book. Those ideas are Lan's. I like both Lan and Lan's ideas."

ACCESSIBLE CONTENT

Text and visual accessibility

- » Ensure font sizes, styles and spacing are readable across devices.
- » Use high colour-contrast between text and background to support visibility.
- » Avoid overly dense blocks of text; use headings, lists and clear structure for readability.
- » Combine with captioning and alternate text to ensure content is accessible to all audiences.

Image alternate text

- » Alternate text should be added to images online including web, social media and paid advertising where possible.
- » Alternate text is different from an image caption or cutline. It is a sentence that describes what is in the image for a person with visual impairments that can be read out loud to them.

Video captioning

- » All videos posted on MRU channels including YouTube, websites, social media, events and ads should have captioning added to them.
 - » When captioning is used to capture a person's words (speaking) in a video, captions that display incorrectly (for example, if the auto-translate gets a word wrong) can be edited to reflect what the person actually says, but captions should not be edited to change what the person says.
 - » Social media platform specific auto-captioning can be used for organic social posts. For example, Instagram or TikTok direct captioning or YouTube videos with captioning can be embedded into websites or social media channels.
 - » On specific platforms that allow captioning edits, review and edit the text to be correct (spelling, names, capitalization) before posting.
 - » On organic social posts that allow you to edit captioning, do not over-edit captioning, allow the real wording to show.
 - » On platforms that have captioning that cannot be edited, review captioning and if it does not mostly reflect the speaker's words correctly, do not use captioning.
 - » On paid social ads with captions, minor edits can be made (for example, remove "um," "uhhhh" and profanity) but be very cautious not to alter the speaker's own words.
 - » Captioning should be added to videos that play as a part of an event (online or in person)
 - » Ensure names and any specific descriptors are provided in advance and spelled properly so as to appear in captioning as the person would expect.
 - » When captioning an event that includes another language, plan ahead to appropriately caption it for the video. For example, at Convocation, instead of "inaudible language" on screen when an elder is speaking, have "Blackfoot language."
 - » Caption paid video advertisements when a person speaking is part of the ad (not necessary for animated or text ads).

DAYS AND MONTHS OF SIGNIFICANCE SUPPORTED BY MRU

MRU has identified national/international dates of significance that have meaning and tangible initiatives related to the University so that we can collaboratively highlight and promote specific dates. These dates fall outside standard/department events and campaigns.

The purpose of this annual calendar is to highlight important dates in Canada and around the world. It helps raise awareness and enhance understanding of various events, activities and communities, and commemorates international days and weeks currently observed by the United Nations.

This calendar includes significant events, celebrations, public holidays and other important dates to be considered when planning university activities. It will assist the Mount Royal community to anticipate when students or employees might choose to seek accommodations, especially for religious observances.

[Click here to access the days and months of significance calendar.](#) Please note that this list is not comprehensive.

KEY AREAS OF COMMUNITY AND BELONGING AT MRU:

[Office of Indigenization and Decolonization](#)

[Access and Inclusion Services](#)

[Wellness Services' Healthy Campus Team](#)

[Students' Association of Mount Royal University's Pride Centre](#)

[Office of Community and Belonging](#)

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A land acknowledgement speaks to the deep and interconnected relationships that First Nations have with all living beings, the spirit world, the universe and one another. It is a profound expression of respect and recognition for the original inhabitants of the land, and aims to make visible and rectify the historical injustices that have marginalized and silenced First Peoples.

Rooted in the principles of in-respect, in-relation and in-reciprocal pedagogy, Mount Royal's land acknowledgement embodies the perspective of a treaty relationship.

Refer to mru.ca/LandAcknowledgement for our institutional land acknowledgement and supporting resources. This webpage provides tools such as:

- » Pronunciation guide
- » Usage guidelines
- » History of Treaty 7
- » What land acknowledgements are and why they are important
- » Land acknowledgement protocols
- » Personalizing land acknowledgements

CULTURAL PROTOCOL AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Do not use quotations or italics for Indigenous language terms such as the Blackfoot word *Mohkinstsis* (Calgary) — this implies “other.” When using Blackfoot language it should be followed by the non-Indigenous language in parentheses or no treatment.

PHOTOS

Always ask permission prior to taking photos of Elders. In all cases, avoid misappropriation, which is an act rooted in a colonial mindset, involving the one-sided taking of Indigenous material or non-material culture without the explicit consent of the appropriate Indigenous person, group or community, and without any fair, mutually agreed-upon exchange.

- » An example is photographing Indigenous peoples without their prior consent or offering any form of reciprocity.
- » In Canada, this practice is particularly damaging because it continues a legacy of inaccurate, disrespectful and harmful depictions originally created by colonial settlers. These depictions served the express objective of dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their land and resources through genocide, driven by a desire for power and profit.
- » Do not capture: Sacred/ceremonial moments such as smudging, Elder blessings and praying.