

WORDS, RISK, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Real-World Inclusive Language Examples for Attorney Communication

Practical guidance for client, workplace, public meeting, and community-facing communication

Purpose: Use this guide to strengthen precision, professionalism, accessibility, and trust. Inclusive communication is not about memorizing perfect words; it is about considering context, impact, dignity, and the responsibilities attached to legal and public-facing roles.

Communication Area	Language or Practice to Reconsider	More Precise Alternative	Attorney Communication Considerations
Abilities & Disabilities	“Wheelchair-bound”	“Person who uses a wheelchair”	Use person-first or identity-first language based on the individual’s preference. Ensure public meetings, notices, documents, and digital materials use accessible language and formats.
Mental Health	“Crazy,” “insane,” or “unstable”	Describe the observable conduct, concern, or impact precisely	Avoid casual diagnostic language. In high-stress legal environments, use neutral language that addresses behavior without stigmatizing mental health conditions.
Gender	Assuming roles or using “chairman” by default	Use “chair,” “chairperson,” or the person’s stated title and pronouns	Avoid assumptions about authority, support roles, family status, or professional identity. Confirm names, titles, and pronouns when appropriate.
Age	“Young lawyer” or “seasoned but outdated”	Describe experience, tenure, skill, or perspective directly	Avoid using age as shorthand for competence, adaptability, authority, or technological ability. Promote generational respect across teams and leadership.
Socioeconomic Status	“Those communities” or “low-level areas”	Name the community or describe the relevant conditions with dignity and neutrality	Frame public finance work without deficit-based assumptions. Distinguish between income, access, infrastructure, and other measurable conditions rather than labeling people or places.
Race & Ethnicity	Coded language, broad generalizations, or identity-based assumptions	Use specific, relevant, and historically informed language	Recognize that community engagement occurs within historical and institutional contexts. Avoid treating racial or ethnic groups as monolithic.

REAL-WORLD INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EXAMPLES (CONTINUED)

Communication Area	Language or Practice to Reconsider	More Precise Alternative	Attorney Communication Considerations
Medical	Assuming capacity, illness, or the need for accommodation	Address functional needs, documented requirements, and stated preferences	Protect confidentiality. Do not speculate about medical conditions or equate a diagnosis with competence, reliability, or decision-making capacity.
Education & Workplace	“Non-technical audience” or “They don’t understand”	“We need to explain the issue more clearly and accessibly”	Shift from hierarchy to clarity. Technical expertise does not eliminate the responsibility to communicate information in a way stakeholders can understand and use.
Pronunciation & Typography	Guessing or repeatedly mispronouncing a name; inaccessible formatting	Ask, confirm, practice, and use accessible document design	Correct pronunciation demonstrates respect and preparation. Use readable fonts, meaningful headings, sufficient contrast, descriptive links, and accessible emails, decks, and materials.
Geography & Community Identity	Using “urban,” “suburban,” or “rural” as coded shorthand	Describe the specific geographic, demographic, infrastructure, or service context	Avoid deficit-based framing. Geography can shape access and public finance needs, but it should not be used as a proxy for competence, character, or community value.

QUICK PRACTICE: BEFORE YOU SPEAK, WRITE, OR RESPOND

Question	Reflection
Precision	Am I naming the actual conduct, condition, or issue—or relying on shorthand and assumptions?
Accessibility	Can the intended audience understand and use the information being communicated?
Context	How might identity, hierarchy, history, or the public setting affect how the message is experienced?
Impact	Could this wording diminish trust, dignity, participation, or professional credibility?
Repair	If the language misses the mark, can I acknowledge it, restate the point, and continue without defensiveness?

Progress over perfection. Precision, curiosity, and accountability strengthen ethical communication.