

THE LANGUAGE POLICE

This list of banned words and stereotypes is an abridgment of a lengthy glossary compiled by a historian from bias guidelines issued by major educational publishers and state agencies. The guidelines are used by writers, editors, and illustrators when preparing textbooks and tests for K–12 students

BY DIANE RAVITCH

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Adam and Eve (replace with “Eve and Adam,” to demonstrate that males do not take priority over females)

Blind, the (banned as offensive; replace with “people who are blind”)

Blind leading the blind, the (banned as handicapism)

Bookworm (banned as offensive; replace with “intellectual”)

Boys’ night out (banned as sexist)

Busybody (banned as sexist, demeaning to older women)

Cassandra (banned as sexist)

Chief Sitting Bull (banned as relic of colonialism; replace with “Tatanka Iyotake”)

Confined to a wheelchair (banned as offensive; replace with “person who is mobility impaired”)

Courageous (banned as patronizing when referring to a person with disabilities)

Craftsmanship (banned as sexist)

Cult (banned as ethnocentric when referring to a religious group)

Deaf, the (banned as offensive; replace with “people who are deaf” or “a person with loss of hearing”)

Devil (banned)

Dialect (banned as ethnocentric; use sparingly)

Differently abled (banned as offensive; replace with “person who has a physical disability”)

Dogma (banned as ethnocentric; replace with “doctrine” or “belief”)

Drunken, Drunkenness (banned as offensive when referring to Native Americans)

Duffer (banned as demeaning to older men)

East, Eastern (banned as Eurocentric)

Egghead (banned as offensive; replace with “intellectual”)

Elderly, the (banned as ageist; replace with “older people”)

Extremist (banned as ethnocentric; replace with “believer,” “follower,” or “adherent”)

Fairy (banned because it suggests homosexuality; replace with “elf”)



Fanatic (banned as ethnocentric; replace with “believer,” “follower,” or “adherent”)

Founding Fathers, the (banned as sexist; replace with “the Founders” or “the Framers”)

Fraternize (banned as sexist)

God (banned)

Heiress (banned as sexist; replace with “heir”)

Hell (banned; replace with “heck” or “damn”)

Heretic (use with caution when comparing religions)

Heroine (banned as sexist; replace with “hero”)

Huts (banned as ethnocentric; replace with “small houses”)

Insane (banned as offensive; replace with “person who has an emotional disorder or psychiatric illness”)

Inspirational (banned as patronizing when referring to a person with disabilities)

Jungle (banned; replace with “rain forest”)

Junk bonds (banned as elitist)

Lame (banned as offensive; replace with “walks with a cane”)

Limping along (banned as handicapism)

Little person (banned as offensive; replace with “person of small stature”)

Lumberjack (banned as sexist; replace with “woodcutter”)

Majority group (banned as offensive)

Man of war (banned as sexist; replace with “warship”)

Mentally ill, the (banned as offensive; replace with “person with a mental or emotional disability”)

Middle East (banned as reflecting a Eurocentric world view; replace with “Southwest Asia”; may be acceptable, however, as a historical reference)

Minority group (banned as offensive)

Mother Russia (banned as sexist; replace with “Russia, vast land of rich harvests”)

Navajo (banned as inauthentic; replace with “Diné”)

Old (banned as an adjective that implies helplessness, dependency, or other negative qualities)

Old wives’ tale (banned as sexist; replace with “folk wisdom”)

Ombudsman (banned as sexist)
One-man band (banned as sexist; replace with “one-person performance”)
Pagan (banned as ethnocentric when referring to religion; replace with “nonbeliever”)
Paraplegic (banned as offensive; replace with “person with paraplegia”)
Past one’s prime (banned as demeaning to older persons)
Pollyanna (banned as sexist)
Polo (banned as elitist)
Regatta (banned as elitist)
Roving the land (banned as reference to Native Americans)
Satan (banned)
Sect (banned as ethnocentric when referring to a religious group, unless it separated from an established religion)
Senile (banned as demeaning to older persons)
Senior citizen (banned as demeaning to older persons)
Slave (replace whenever possible with “enslaved person”)
Snowman (banned; replace with “snow person”)
Soul food (banned as regional or ethnic bias)
Stickball (banned as regional or ethnic bias)
Straw man (banned as sexist; replace with “unreal issue” or “misrepresentation”)
Subgroup (banned as offensive reference to cultural differences)
Sufferer of cerebral palsy (banned as offensive; replace with “person who has loss of muscle control”)
Suffragette (banned as sexist; replace with “suffragist”)
Tomboy (banned as sexist)
Turning a deaf ear (banned as handicapism)
West, Western (banned as Eurocentric)
Yacht (banned as elitist)

STEREOTYPED IMAGES TO AVOID IN TEXT, ILLUSTRATIONS, AND READING PASSAGES IN TESTS:

Girls and Women / Boys and Men: Images to avoid

- Women portrayed as teachers, mothers, nurses, and/or secretaries
- Women of achievement who are domineering, aggressive, lacking in desirable personal attributes
- Women aging less gracefully than men
- Women as more nurturing than men
- Men as active problem solvers
- Men playing sports, working with tools
- Men and boys larger and heavier than women and girls
- Father expressionless or relaxed in trying circumstances
- Females more preoccupied with their appearance than males
- Pioneer woman riding in covered wagon while man walks
- Women as passengers on a sailboat or sipping hot chocolate in a ski lodge
- Girls as peaceful, emotional, warm
- Boys as strong, rough, competitive
- Boys as intelligent, logical, mechanical
- Boys as good at math, science

People of color: Images to avoid

- People of color being angry
- People of color as politically liberal

African-American people: Images to avoid

- African-Americans who have white features or all look alike
- African-Americans in crowded tenements on chaotic streets; in big, bright cars; in abandoned buildings with broken windows and wash hanging out; or living in innocuous, dull white-picket-fence neighborhoods
- African-Americans who are baggage handlers

Native American people: Images to avoid

- Native Americans performing a rain dance
- Native Americans who are not part of the American mainstream
- Native Americans living in rural settings on reservations
- Native Americans with long hair, braids, headbands
- Native Americans portrayed as people who live in harmony with nature

Asian-American people: Images to avoid

- Asian-Americans as very intelligent, excellent scholars
- Asian-Americans as ambitious, hardworking, and competitive
- Asian-Americans as having strong family ties
- Chinese people who have great food
- Korean-Americans owning or working in fruit markets

Hispanic-American people: Images to avoid

- Hispanics who are migrant workers
- Hispanics who are warm, expressive, and emotional
- Hispanics in urban settings (ghettos or barrios)
- Hispanics wearing bright colors, older women in black, girls always in dresses
- Mexicans grinding corn

Persons who are older: Images to avoid

- Older people in nursing homes or with canes, walkers, wheelchairs, orthopedic shoes, or eyeglasses
- Older people as ill, physically weak, feeble, or dependent
- Older people as funny, absentminded, fussy, or charming
- Older people who have twinkles in their eyes, need afternoon naps, lose their hearing or sight, suffer aches and pains
- Older people who are retired, are at the end of their careers, have lived the most fruitful years of their lives, or are engaged in a life of leisure activities
- Older people living with their offspring or with other relatives
- Older people who are fishing, baking, knitting, whittling, reminiscing, rocking in chairs, or watching television ❏

Diane Ravitch is a historian of education and Research Professor of Education at New York University. The glossary excerpted here will appear in her new book, The Language Police, to be published in April by Knopf.

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