Inclusive Language in NIST Technical Series Publications
To promote U.S. innovation and industrial competitiveness by advancing measurement science, standards, and technology in ways that enhance economic security and improve our quality of life.
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Where it started

There is language in technology and standards publications that is exclusionary, biased, and harmful.

**Loaded terms:** Technology professionals have long used “whitelist” and “blacklist” for certain software rules, along with “master” and “slave” to describe the control relationship between hardware components. The ISPAB plans to formally urge agencies to abandon these and other terms that evoke the legacy of oppression that the Black community has experienced.

In June, against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter protests, engineers at social media platforms, coding groups and international standards bodies re-examined their code and asked themselves: Was it racist? Some of their databases were called “masters” and were surrounded by “slaves,” which received information from the masters and answered queries on their behalf, preventing them from being overwhelmed. Others used “whitelists” and “blacklists” to filter content.

Microsoft’s GitHub, a popular software-development platform with 50 million users, will replace the word master as the default branch name for new repositories, a spokesperson says. GitHub is also making it easy for users to choose their own default branch name when creating a new repository and is releasing guidance to rename existing ones, the spokesperson says. There’s never been a complementary use of slave in GitHub’s repository architecture.

**Sources:**
- Politico June 2020 article
- Wired July 2020 article
- NY Times April 2021 article
How we responded

Library

Publications Team

Inclusive Language in NIST Technical Series Publications

Standards Coordination

Collaboration

Standards Inclusivity Effort (SIE)

Guidance for NIST Staff on Using Inclusive Language in Documentary Standards (NISTIR 8366)
The process

- **Emails to NIST about harmful language in our Technical Series Publications**
- **Standards Inclusivity Effort (SIE) Team is formed to put together NIST-wide guidance**
- **Library decides to update internal Technical Series author instructions with new section on inclusive language. Includes a table of terms to avoid and alternatives. Reviewed by multiple NIST offices and groups**
- **SIE Team drafts guidance on inclusive language in standards activities. The SIE guidance includes a section that pulls from the Library’s author instructions**
- **First draft of SIE guidance is posted on internal website, comments requested by end of November**
- **Library revises author instructions, replaces table with contextual examples**
- **Library posts new author instructions with inclusive language section on NIST.gov**
- **SIE Team asks all NIST groups focused on diversity and inclusivity to comment on revised guidance**
- **SIE Team guidance is published as NISTIR 8366**
- **Library continues to receive and review suggested updates to author instructions**
- **SDOs and other organizations use NISTIR 8366 as a reference when creating their own inclusive language guidance**
Important decisions

- Context, context, context
- Plain language
- Focus on intended meaning
- No definitive list of terms to avoid and alternatives

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<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Suggested Edits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application whitelisting</strong> technologies use <strong>whitelists</strong> to control which applications are permitted to execute on a host.</td>
<td><strong>Application control</strong> technologies use <strong>allowlists</strong> to control which applications are permitted to execute on a host.</td>
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| We denote the studied wireless network by the **black box** because the network specifics are not assumed to be available to the proposed test method. | *There is no implied negativity or inequity in this sentence.*  
*Note: This example may be rewritten using more precise language (e.g., opaque box), as appropriate.* |
| And sometimes we complain that measurement standards work cannot get management attention or that it is too low on the priority **totem pole**. | And sometimes we complain that measurement standards work cannot get management attention or that it is **a low priority**. |
| Another regulator would like a **grandfather** period of ten years and then a conversion to mass units on dispensers and advertising. | Another regulator would like an **exemption** period of ten years and then a conversion to mass units on dispensers and advertising. |
Lessons learned

Opportunities

Inclusive language is beneficial to everyone

Listening and learning how your language impacts others will create a welcoming space for everyone

Paying close attention to writing and speaking will help create better communicators

Since language is always evolving, recommendations didn’t need to be finite; what we publish only reflects current understanding

Challenges

People focus on what words they’re not allowed to say/write anymore

Debate over language can feel personal

We had to become amateur linguists as we debated alternatives for words that had been identified as harmful

Words in science and technology publications can have different connotations than in the general vernacular