

Wavemaker

Wavemaker Inclusive Language Guide

Led by Inclusion Champions

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What is Inclusive Language?

in·clu·sive / in 'kloōsiv /

Inclusive language enables everyone to feel that they are being reflected in the conversation. It is language that avoids biases, slang or expressions that discriminate against groups of people based on their identity or immutable characteristics (e.g., race, gender, age, sexual orientation, cultural background, disability or socioeconomic status).

What is the purpose of the guide?

How does it impact me?

We all know the power that words carry with them – and as a result each of us needs to be responsible for what we say. Part of that responsibility involves being consciously aware of the meaning and connotations behind our words. Collective awareness is the first step to bringing about collective change.

This guide was created by the Inclusion Champions to do just that! This guide includes several commonly used words and phrases that either have a bias or can be considered exclusive, as it leaves out entire groups of people. We've also included some that we hope are not commonly used, as they are downright offensive and should not be part of our common vocabulary. As a note, this guide is not meant to be an exhaustive list and is not all inclusive – there are (unfortunately) many more examples that can be added. However, the Inclusion Champions identified a range of familiar terms in the spirit of educating us to all be more mindful.

As you go through the guide, there will be some surprising ones that you may have never given a second thought to simply because they are subtle and engrained in our personal lingo or work-life. If that is the case, let this guide serve as that “pause” for you to reassess some of your own word choices and the impact it can have on others. The reality is, context matters! There are examples in the guide that may not automatically be exclusive (for instance, she/he), but in certain contexts, it can be, without knowing how that person identifies.

Collective action is the second step to bringing about collective change. Admittedly, it will take some time to train ourselves to use different word choices, but in being more collectively aware and with each of us doing our part, we will begin to see language shift to create an even more inclusive culture that is accountable for one another and makes everyone feels reflected.

How can you proactively be part of the change?

It takes a conscious effort to speak in a way that is free of bias:

Pause and think about your words before you say them or write them (re-read email or Teams communications to skim for any exclusive words)

Be an ally for one another:

if you see or hear exclusive words being used, help to educate, and share inclusive replacements.

Be open to listening to others and learning from their perspectives.

This builds a better understanding of experiences unlike our own and can impact our lens for how we say things.

Use this guide as a conversation starter with your teammates.

What phrases stood out to them? Do they agree/disagree with any of them? Would they add any? How can you hold one another accountable to be more mindful of word choice?

Take Action: Consider other terms or phrases not on the list that would be beneficial to add. Share your thoughts with your team's Inclusion Champion. They'll share with the broader Inclusion Champion community for consideration in a future update.

Inclusive Language Guide

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Gender-Based to Gender-Neutral

Gender and sexual orientation are both highly personal and constantly evolving. Even so, much of our everyday language excludes people who don't identify as exclusively male or female. It also can exclude or harm people who may not look or act in a way that aligns with stereotypical gender "norms". With that in mind, it is important to consider using gender-neutral terms to avoid bias towards a particular sex or social gender – especially when it is not relevant or needed to convey your thought. Repeated instances of being misgendered can negatively impact someone's overall mental health and sense of psychological safety regardless of whether or not the instances are unintentional. Small tweaks to our language can go a long way to mitigate these occurrences in an effort to be more gender-inclusive. At its core, some words like "he/she" are not inherently problematic but context is king here. When referring to or addressing specific people, use their proper pronouns, and if you don't know – consider what neutral replacement could be used as a substitute. At Wavemaker, one way to help address this is by adding your gender pronouns to email signatures – join the cause!



01



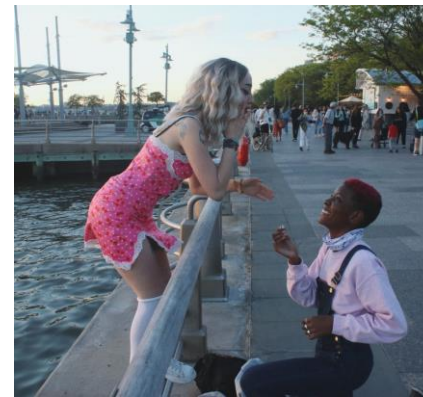
Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
Hey Guys	everyone, folks, y'all	"Guys" is a masculine word and using alternatives that are not gender-specific makes the greeting apply to all
Man hours	person hours, staff hours, work hours	Dates back to a time where men were the primary/sole wage earners. Excludes the work that women and those who do not identify as male put in
Best man for the job	Best person for the job	The phrase is exclusionary to women and those who do not identify as a male. Overall, a person's gender does not define or equal performance
Husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend	Spouse/partner	While these terms are not inherently exclusive, the context in which you use them can be. If you identify strictly as a male or female and identify someone as your boyfriend/girlfriend, the term is fine. However, if you are unsure of how someone else identifies, consider going with a gender-neutral term or phrase when addressing them
Chairman	Chairperson	This gendered term implies that the position is held by a man, but women too can hold a title of this stature, so alternative neutral classifications help create that inclusivity
Expectant mothers	pregnant people	Expectant mothers may not include all persons who may become pregnant. The term "mother" denotes a woman whereas, gender binary people and others do also become pregnant
Mothering/Fathering	parenting	These terms are both gendered, which is exclusive to those who don't identify rigidly as a man or woman. They also reinforce gender roles that should be fluid
Take it like a man/man up	are you okay? Let me know if this bothers you	This is an example of sexist language and spreads toxic masculinity. Telling someone to man up furthers gendered stereotyping by identifying women as weak, irrational and overemotional

LGBTQ+ Related, and Sexual Orientation Related Words & Phrases

Much of everyday language includes gendered-related words and can in turn make assumptions of how one identifies. This can erase the identity of many, considering these rigid groupings don't apply to fluid identities. For the LGBTQ+ community, it's no secret that there has been an uphill battle for equality and representation across the board. Part of that is having to navigate through biases, outright discrimination and having to be outspoken about stigmatizing words and labels. The work to ensure there is safety for those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community starts with us. The following words are some of many that should be checked, corrected and addressed.



02



Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
Transgenders/ A transgender	Transgender people/ a transgender person	As noted by GLAAD, transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun, so instead, the proper way to use the term would be "Tony is a transgender man" or "The parade included many transgender people."
Tranny/transvestite	Transgender/a trans person/ a transgender person	The term "tranny" is used as a dehumanizing slur to describe transgender individuals and should be avoided
Hermaphrodite	intersex	Hermaphrodite is an outdated and derogatory word and the proper term would be intersex to describe a person born with reproductive or sexual anatomy and/or a chromosome pattern that can't be classified as typically male or female.
Homosexual	gay, lesbian bi, bisexual	As noted by GLAAD, anti-gay activists often use words like "homosexual" to stigmatize gay people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms
Like a girl/boy/man/woman	Use a non-gendered adjective to convey your feeling or thought	Using gender to define how well an action was completed perpetuates old-fashioned and harmful gender norms and stereotypes
That's gay	There is no replacement phrase or word and no appropriate use for it in any context	In general, "gay" as a standalone word is not problematic. It becomes problematic when it is used as a way to describe something negative or that one opposes of. Whether intentional or not, using it in this way is insulting and offensive.
No homo	There is no replacement phrase or word and no appropriate use for it in any context	This phrase is harmful because it is typically said as a way to reject someone's perception that they might be gay which in turn perpetuates the idea that there is something shameful about identifying as gay
Sissy	There is no replacement word and no appropriate use for the term in any context	Sissy is a derogatory term used to define boys/men classified as "feminine." Part of its history is rooted in a 1970s government funded-experiment called "The Sissy Boy Experiment" at UCLA. The experimental aversion therapy was designed to make "feminine" boys more masculine which ended up having a devastating outcome later on in life for Kraig Murphy who was enrolled in the experiment at 4-years old

Ableist + Disability Language

Ableism is any word, phrase or set of practices that devalues people who have any form of disability. Ableist words imply – intentionally or unintentionally – that anything other than “typical” abilities are inferior or lacking. One of the more frequent ways ableism shows up is using terms or phrases that refer to one’s disabilities to describe something negative. Phrases like “turned a blind eye to” or “fell on deaf ears” are all too common and perpetuate false and harmful notions about what living with a disability is like. There are better, more precise words or phrases that can describe the thought or feeling without tying it to terms used to describe a disability.

03



Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
Dwarf	When referring to people of short stature, use the terms dwarf, little person, person with dwarfism or person of short stature. Don't use these phrases to refer to someone who is shorter than average or in other contexts.	Dwarf is considered acceptable only when referring to the genetic condition "dwarfism," but it is often considered offensive when used in a non-medical sense.
Midget	When referring to people of short stature, use the terms dwarf, little person, person with dwarfism or person of short stature.	According to Little People of America, the word "midget" was created as a label to refer to people of short stature who were on public display for sport and curiosity. It's considered a derogatory slur that should not be used in reference to a person.
Retard/Retardation/Retarded	intellectual disability; mental disability	These "R" words have become hurtful slurs towards people with intellectual disabilities. In 2010, "intellectual disability" replaced "mental retardation" in U.S federal law (Known as Rosa's Bill, if you'd like to learn more)
The disabled/ the handicapped	otherly abled/differently abled, disabled people/persons, people with disabilities	These terms have a negative connotations because a person isn't a disability. You should refer to the person first before referring to the disability
cripple/crippled by	a disabled person, a person who is disabled	This word has a negative connotations because a person isn't a disability. You should refer to the person first before referring to the disability
lame	Avoid using it as a judgement or descriptor	The word "lame" is commonly used as a negative descriptor to mean that something is unoriginal, uncool, or weak. But the original, dictionary definition of the word means "disabled or impaired, paralyzed or unable to move" so it's best avoided in reference to a person or their actions or as a descriptor
Blind spot	failed to see, areas of weakness, shortcoming	Blind is commonly misused and misappropriated with negligence, lack of understanding or a weakness. References of "blind" should be used properly to indicate sightlessness, or preventing sight from operating
Am I blind?/ Turn a blind eye to	Did I miss something? Could you spot check this?	Blind is commonly misused and misappropriated with negligence, lack of understanding or a weakness. References of "blind" should be used properly to indicate sightlessness, or preventing sight from operating

Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
Falling on deaf ears	Can you hear me? Did you hear me?	Deaf can be misused if it's used in proper context. In phrases such as these, it can perpetuate false notions of what it's like to live with this disability. Ultimately, being deaf is involuntary, whereas hearing people who let pleas 'fall on deaf ears' are making a conscious choice to ignore those requests. Labelling them 'deaf' frames the person as passive and unable to hear, rather than people actively responsible for their own decisions.
Sanity check	quick check, confidence check	The word "sanity" has often been used as a way to discriminate against those with a mental illness and implies there is something wrong with those who have one
spaz	hyper, distracted	"Spaz" is short for spastic. Spastic is used to describe tense muscles that can be a result of cerebral palsy or other neurological disabilities. If your intent is to describe something that is unpredictable or "hyper" - use those words instead. Do not use terms like these as an adjective.
moron	There is no replacement word – it is offensive in any context it is used in	The term originated as a psychological classification of someone with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but it is no longer an accepted medical term. It was coined by a researcher and eugenicist who hoped that "better breeding could rid America of it's flaws". The descriptor was used as a way to deport immigrants and force sterilizations, with significant Italians, Jews and Hungarians being impacted. It carries a heavy social stigma about it and is often used by people as an intentional insult.

Substance Use + Mental Health

Very closely intertwined with ableism, the words and phrases in this grouping can often have negative associations and even devalue those using a substance or living with a mental illness. It is important to keep in mind that despite one's diagnosis, they are human first and should be addressed as such. The way to do this is by using "person first" language. Person-first language doesn't define a person based on any medical disorder they may have. It's nonjudgmental and neutral, which can help to reduce stigma.

As we look to reframe our language, we should refrain from using a mental illness or substance related word/phrase as a shorthand way of describing something unrelated to their original use. Instead of doing that, make the conscious effort to say what you really mean. If you're describing someone who lives for an organized space, say just that versus using "OCD" as an adjective. When words or phrases are used as adjectives, there's an implication that it's a trait or identity, not a condition. To help change that, focus on reframing language and word choice in healthier more direct ways.

04



Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
mentally ill person	has a mental illness / living with a mental illness	People with mental health issues have far more sides to them than their mental illnesses. "Mentally ill person" labels someone with their diagnosis before acknowledging them as an individual first. Use "person first" language as a way to honor that there are many other parts of a person outside of their diagnosis.
Am I crazy?	Did I miss something? or "keep me honest"	This phrase is stigmatizing because it describes either negative behaviors or a personality flaw and attributes it to mental illness, whether or not the person actually has symptoms of that illness (similar to sanity check).
OCD	very organized, particular	OCD, short for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a mental health disorder that affects millions of people and can often be debilitating. Saying the word OCD in its proper context to speak either about the disorder or acknowledge that someone has it is not problematic. Using it out of this context and/or as an adjective (i.e. "I'm so OCD") is.
ADD/ADHD	unfocused, all over the place, distracted, hyper	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition with symptoms such as inattentiveness, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. Using these terms in its proper context to speak about the disorder or acknowledging someone who has it is not problematic. However, using ADD or ADHD as adjectives is. Especially as it is typically used with the intent to describe lack of focus or things being out of order which is invalidating to those who truly experience these on far larger scales.
Bipolar	indecisive, conflicted, unpredictable	Preferred habits and/or traits should not be compared to mental health disorders, doing so hurts those who have been diagnosed with it and further misinforms. Additionally, these words should not be used as an adjective, figure of speech or synonym to mean anything outside of its proper medical context
Depressed	upset, discouraged, sad	Oftentimes, the word "depressed" is used widely as a figure of speech or as a synonym for sadness. Doing so minimizes the experience of millions of Americans diagnosed with depression and can cloud the picture of when someone is actually experiencing those symptoms.

Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
drug problem	Substance Use disorder	This frames the person as one with a problem rather than one who is facing a challenging situation
Alcoholic/addict/abuser	someone/people who misuse(s) alcohol or drugs	This frames the person as one with a problem rather than one who is facing a challenging situation
Substance Abuse	Substance Use	This frames the person as one with a problem rather than one who is facing a challenging situation
off your medication /off your meds	are you feeling ok today?/ you seem a little frazzled	There is a lot of stigma and misconceptions around medication for mental illness. In general, medication isn't for everyone and with the many possible side effects, it is offensive to correlate someone's behavior to a lack of medication.
suffering from	living with, being treated for	It implies that they are a victim, rather than a fully realized person who happens to have an illness/disability.
Diabetic/autistic/(X)tic	person with diabetes, person with autism, person with X	Use person centered language. The person's difference, disability, or illness does not define them
Victims	Survivors/people involved/subject/recipient	This makes the event the defining factor about that person rather than something that happened to them and that they are moving on from
normal/not normal	neurotypical/neurodiverse	It refers to societal norms that are problematic to perpetuate as it implies being different is a bad thing

Cultural Related Words or Phrases

Many of the common words and phrases we say date way back! In acknowledging the troubled history of the U.S., it's no surprise that the origin of many of these words are embedded in racism/racist ideals. While some may have distinct origins that can be referenced, others simply have distinct attributes that perpetuate stereotypes. The words or phrases you'll see takes a critical look at the messages being told and their underlying racial connotations.

05



Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
Master	Primary, original, overall	The word "master" is rooted in slavery and evokes slave masters in the US South
whitelist/blacklist	inclusion and exclusion list, authorize/allow/exclude/block	These terms promote the idea that "white" is to be trusted/is positive while "black" is denoted as bad, wrong or not welcome and reinforces negative and racist social norms
thug	There is no replacement word and no appropriate use for the term	This is an example of coded language which essentially is any word or phrase that disguises explicit and/or implicit racial bias. While in its technical definition, "thug" is supposed to refer to a violent person or a criminal, it has historically been used to specifically refer to Black people and carries a deadly connotation that Black people are criminal or violent.
Peanut Gallery	viewers/attendees/in the group	While this term has a few different meanings, one is used as a racial slur referring to the back section of theaters that were usually the cheapest and reserved only for people of color
lynch / lynch mob	There is no replacement word or phrase and no appropriate use for it, except for in its historical context	While the term has evolved into an umbrella term for an "unjust attack," lynch mobs originated as mobs of (almost always White) people who would attack, assault, abuse, and hang people of color as a form of "justice." Considering this history, there is no need to reference this term unless in its original historical context.
Blackball/Black Mark	excluded, blocked, held against, incorrect, mark against, strike against	These terms use "black" to denote bad, wrong, or incorrect and in turn, subtly reinforces negative and racist social norms
Sold down the river	threw under the bus, betrayed, screwed over	For many years, the phrase has been used to signify a profound betrayal. However, the historical context refers to a dark past in the first half of the 19th century where enslaved people would be "sold down the river" and transported to cotton plantations. This meant being separated from family, brutal hard labor and an increase in demand for slave labor in the South.
Grandfathered In	legacy, long time customer	The "Grandfather Clause" was first coined in the 1890s and referred to voting rights. After the 15th Amendment was ratified, race could no longer be used to ban citizens from voting, but some Southern states still found ways to suppress voting - particularly from African-Americans. They imposed poll taxes and a literacy test, however because there was a large majority of both white and Black males who were illiterate, a "grandfather clause" was added to allow illiterate men to vote only if their ancestors had been registered to vote before 1867 which many Black men did not have. While the term is often used without the connotation of disenfranchisement, the history it holds must be taken into account.

Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
model minority	No Replacement – there is no need to use the term	This is a stereotype of cultural expectations placed on Asian Americans as a group that each individual will be smart, wealthy, hard-working, docile and submissive. Using this term furthers these stereotypes, can be stigmatizing and helps to pit Asian Americans against one another
Gypped/Jipped	ripped off/cheated	The term originated from the term "Gypsy," and is a derogatory term associated with the Romani people that carries negative connotations. It often refers to somebody who has been swindled, cheated or defrauded and should be avoided
off the reservation	mixed it up, tried something new, experimented, changed it up	This is a common phrase, which is often used without the context of its original meaning. Namely, that Native American people were restricted to reservations created by the U.S. government, and their freedom was severely limited by the terms of the treaties they were often forced to sign. While it is not necessarily identified as a "slur," the phrase is not genuine and is deemed offensive based on its historical context
Indian	Indigenous person, Native American, First Nations or refer to a person's specific tribe (e.g. Choctaw, Apache, Chippewa)	<p>The term "Indian" in the U.S is associated with Christopher Columbus who mistook the Caribbean islands for the Indian Ocean. As a result, he began to refer to those indigenous people as Indians and the term has stuck and is associated with the subjugation and decimation of the native people after Europeans arrived.</p> <p>While there isn't a universal consensus around terminology to replace "Indian," it is a good rule of thumb to either use one of the replacement words or to be neutral until you know how one self-identifies.</p>
cakewalk	a breeze, a piece of cake, super easy	While the term is often used to mean "easy," (e.g. that pitch as a total cakewalk), the term dates back to a 19th-century dance, invented by enslaved people in the South and was intended as a way to entertain their slaveowners. These would turn into a competition where slaveowners would select the most elegant dancer, with the prize being slices of cake. The cakewalk fame eventually spread and gave rise to two other cliches - "That takes the cake!" and "piece of cake."
eenie meenie miney mo	flip a coin, pick one, phone a friend	What we know to be a children's song has origins in the slave trade. There's an idea that it comes from a description of what white slave owners would do if they caught an enslaved person who ran away.
Uppity	arrogant, too proud, full of themselves	A term used to describe those who are "getting above their station", used especially against people of color during the Jim Crow era

Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
spirit animal	familiar, animal icon, favorite animal, Patronus	<p>While it's not clear how the term became such a popular phrase - and often isn't even referencing an actual animal, the term is offensive to those of indigenous cultures. The concept of the spirit animal comes, most directly, from Native Americans spirituality. Though there are variations across tribes and cultures, the spirit animal—otherwise known as a "totem animal"—generally takes the form of a single animal with which a person or a clan shares a certain set of characteristics and kinship. The animal acts as a guide and protector for humans and are sometimes used to communicate the values and spiritual beliefs of Native communities.</p> <p>With this term becoming a pop culture phenomenon, it turns their sacred connections and reverence for a "spirit helper or animal guide," into a damaging form of cultural appropriation and is culturally insensitive</p>
Witch Hunt	search	<p>While the phrase originated from a search for people who were labeled witches, it contains a gender dynamic that is often overlooked. ~80% of those accused of witchcraft in the European witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries were women, with other medieval witch hunts targeting ~95% of women. It's important to note that the witch hunts tended to single out gender-nonconforming women, who threatened a social system based on rigid gender roles. Anyone who didn't behave in what was classified as "feminine behavior" were targeted with that being evidence for believing they did witchcraft. As a result, these tools reinforced a male-dominated system of authority and as such, the term carries negative connotations - especially when used most recently as a political term</p>
hip hip hooray	hooray, awesome, fantastic, yay	<p>The term "hep hep" was a term used by German shepherds to herd sheep. In the early 1800s it was used during violence against German Jews, and later used during the Holocaust by Nazis as they hunted down Jewish citizens</p>
kosher	If by Kosher, you mean "legitimate, approved, or legal" - it is best to use these words instead to avoid offense	<p>The word Kosher comes from the word "Kashér" and it relates to Jewish traditions/ laws surrounding practices and dietary patterns that are mentioned in the Jewish Sacred Scripture of the Torah. The meaning of Kosher is pure, proper, and suitable for consumption. The term has been used to often mean "approval" or "legitimate." While there is not universal consensus on whether using "kosher" in this way is offensive, there are many who believe it dilutes the meaning and connection to the Jewish faith. As a result, only use the word in proper context to avoid unintentionally offending someone</p>

Socio-Economic Words/Phrases

People can make negative and positive assumptions based on where someone lives and their perceived socio-economic status. These assumptions can in turn lead to harmful language based on cultural stereotypes and historic events. Many of the terms we use or hear have become so engrained in our lives that the underlying biases may not always be top of mind. We must all remember our own privilege when we speak and move away from classist language – especially knowing many of these innately come from a biased lens and cause further divide.

Inclusive language related to socio-economic status should:
Avoid terms that have negative connotations based on where someone is from or what they do.

Avoid terms that carry biases attached to certain races or ethnic groups.

06



Old word/phrase	Inclusive Replacement word(s)/phrase(s)	Origins/why it's not inclusive
Class	socioeconomic status	The term "class" alone can have a bias as it is based on a distinction made about one's status (i.e. high class, low class, etc.). However, class can't be discussed without having context of the socio- or economic impacts that are interrelated and pivotal to that discussion. Socioeconomic status helps to anchor some of the context by examining multiple factors of one's social standing: education income, occupation, etc. which reveals inequities and provides a more in-depth foundation
inner city	There is no replacement word. Instead, use the specific name of the neighborhood or city that is being referenced	In its common use, the term is a euphemism for poor, Black, urban neighborhoods and is often associated with inferiority. With it being a racially loaded term, it in many ways still has historical ties to redlining and other forms of legal and illegal housing discrimination
Ghetto/hood	There is no replacement word. Instead, use the specific name of the neighborhood or city that is being referenced	In America, the term became associated with poor areas with majority Black/LatinX residents. Now, it's a bigoted term that gets tossed around to mean low-class. Additionally, neighborhoods classified as such tend to lead to the criminalization and over-policing of communities of color.
hillbilly/redneck	No Replacement - there is no need to use the term	<p>These are pejorative terms often referring to poor-White Southern males. The term is tied to elements such as racism, guns and a lack of sophistication. While some communities have aimed to reclaim and redefine these words, it still is a slur and carries a negative connotation that should be avoided.</p> <p>Hillbilly originated as a derogatory term for Scottish men who settled in Appalachia, as William is a common Scottish name and they lived in the hills.</p> <p>Redneck was used to denote a common laborer who worked outdoors. The sunburns on the back of their necks gave rise to the name and was used to denote someone who was seen as uneducated and ignorant.</p>

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Grow fearless