

Gender Fair Language

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Introduction

Our language and society reflect one another, so it is important for us as communicators to recognize and respect change in the meaning and acceptability of words. Concern about the use of sexist language is part of our increased awareness that the perceived meanings of some words have changed in response to the changing roles of men and women in our society. For example, *girl* once meant a young person of either sex, while *youth* indicated only a young man. Now, *girl* applies only to young female persons, while *youth* can refer to young persons of either sex. Just as you would not use *girl* with its outdated meaning, you should not use other words connoting gender that do not accurately represent the people behind them.

If you write with nonsexist language, you write to represent with fairness the gender identified in many words. Gender-fair language minimizes unnecessary concern about gender in your subject matter, allowing both you and your reader to focus on what people do rather than on which sex they happen to be. For example, the practice of using *he* and *man* as generic terms poses a common problem. Rather than presenting a general picture of reality, *he* and *man* used generically can mislead your audience. Research by Wendy Martyna has shown that the average reader's tendency is to imagine a male when reading *he* or *man*, even if the rest of the passage is gender-neutral. Therefore, you cannot be sure that your reader will see the woman on the job if you refer to every technician as *he*, or that your reader will see the woman in the *history of man*. On the other hand, replacing every *he* with *he or she* attracts even more attention to gender and defeats your purpose. This predicament merits special attention in scientific and technical writing, where any ambiguity is unacceptable.

Below are some examples of how you can revise the most common sexist usages of *he* and *man*.

PROBLEM: By using either *he*, *his*, or *him* as a generic pronoun when the referent's gender is unknown or irrelevant, the writer misrepresents the species as male.

Solution 1: Write the sentence without pronouns. Try to avoid conditional structures, generally introduced by "if" or "when," which often require the use of pronouns.

Original: If the researcher is the principal investigator, he should place an asterisk after his name.

Gender-fair: Place an asterisk after the name of the principal investigator.

Solution 2: Use gender-specific pronouns only to identify a specific gender or a specific person.

Original: Repeat the question for each subject so that he understands it.

Gender-fair: Repeat the question for each male subject so that he fully understands it.

Solution 3: Use plural nouns and pronouns if they do not change the meaning of the sentence.

Original: Repeat the question for each subject so that he understands it.

Gender-fair: Repeat the question for all subjects so that they understand it.

Solution 4: Use a first- or second-person perspective. Notice in the table below that only the third-person singular is marked for gender.

Table of Personal Pronouns	
Singular	
First Person - I, my, me, mine	
Second Person - you, your, yours	
Third Person - it, she, he, her, him, its, hers, his	
Plural	
First Person - we, our, ours, us	
Second Person - you, your, yours	
Third Person - they, them, their, theirs	

Original: The driver should take his completed registration form to the clerk's window and pay his license fee.

Gender-fair: You should take your completed registration form to the clerk's window and pay your license fee.

Original: The principal investigator for this report has appended data tables to his summary.

Gender-fair: I have appended data tables to the summary of this report.

The following solutions produce language less fluent than Solutions 1 through 4.

Solution 5: Use a double pronoun, i.e. s/he, he or she, he/she, him and her.

Original: Each supervisor will be at his workstation by 8 a.m.

Gender-fair: Each supervisor will be at his or her workstation by 8 a.m.

Solution 6: Use an article instead of a possessive pronoun as a modifier.

Original: After filling out his class schedule, the student should place it in the registrar's basket.

Gender-fair: After filling out a class schedule, the student should place it in the registrar's basket.

Solution 7: Sparingly use the passive voice.

Original: If a student wishes to avoid sex bias in his writing, he should examine these alternatives.

Gender-fair: These alternatives should be examined by any student who wishes to avoid sex bias in writing.

Note: Though not acceptable in formal writing, a common speech pattern uses a form of *they* (*they, them, their, theirs*) as a generic pronoun following *everyone, anybody*, and other indefinite pronouns: "Everyone cheered when their team won the game."

PROBLEM: By using *man* as a generic noun to represent groups that include women, the writer misrepresents the species as male.

Solution 1: Use *human, person, mortal*, and their variations: *humankind, humanity, human beings, human race, and people*.

Original: The effect of PCBs has been studied extensively in rats and man.

Gender-fair: The effect of PCBs has been studied extensively in rats and humans.

Solution 2: Use a more descriptive or inclusive compound word: workmen's = *workers'*; man-sized = *sizable, adult-sized*; chairman, chairwoman = *chair, chairperson, presider, convener*.

Original: The governor signed the workmen's compensation bill.

Gender-fair: The governor signed the workers' compensation bill.

With practice, you will use gender-fair constructions more readily and with less revision. For more information on sexism in language and how to avoid or revise it, please see the following bibliography.

References

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