

Gender-Sensitive Language

What this handout is about

This handout will explain some of the current thinking on gender issues and writing and will provide suggestions to help you appropriately express gender relationships as you write.

What is “gender-sensitive language” and why should I use it?

English speakers and writers have traditionally been taught to use masculine nouns and pronouns in situations where the gender of their subject(s) is unclear or variable, or when a group to which they are referring contains members of both sexes. For example, the US Declaration of Independence states that “. . . all men are created equal . . .” and most of us were taught in elementary school to understand the word “men” in that context includes both male and female Americans. In recent decades, however, as women have become increasingly involved in the public sphere of American life, writers have reconsidered the way they express gender identities and relationships. Because most English language readers no longer understand the word “man” to be synonymous with “people,” writers today must think more carefully about the ways they express gender in order to convey their ideas clearly and accurately to their readers.

Moreover, these issues are important for people concerned about issues of social inequality. There is a relationship between our language use and our social reality. If we “erase” women from language, that makes it easier to maintain gender inequality. As Professor Sherryl Kleinman (2000:6) has argued,

[M]ale-based generics are another indicator—and, more importantly, a *reinforcer*—of a system in which “man” in the abstract and men in the flesh are privileged over women.

Words matter, and our language choices have consequences. If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, then we should think seriously about how to reflect that belief in our language use.

If you’re reading this handout, you’re probably already aware that tackling gender sensitivity in your writing is no small task, especially since there isn’t yet (and there may never be) a set of concrete guidelines on which to base your decisions. Fortunately, there are a number of different strategies the gender-savvy writer can use to express gender relationships with precision. This handout will provide you with an overview of some of those strategies so that you can “mix and match” as necessary when you write.

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that substitutes for a noun. The English language provides pronoun options for references to masculine nouns (for example, “he” can substitute for “Tom”), feminine nouns (“she” can replace “Lucy”), and neutral/non-human nouns (“it” stands in for “a tree”), but no choice for sex-neutral third-person singular nouns (“the writer,” “a student,” or “someone”). Although most of us learned in elementary school that masculine pronouns (he, his, him) should be used as the “default” in situations where the referent (that is, the person or thing to which you’re referring) could be either male or female, that usage is generally considered unacceptable now. So what should you do when you’re faced with one of those gender-neutral or gender-ambiguous situations? Well, you’ve got a few options . . .

1. Use “they”

This option is currently much debated by grammar experts, but most agree that it works well in at least several kinds of situations. In order to use “they” to express accurately gender relationships, you’ll need to understand that “they” is traditionally used only to refer to a plural noun. For example,

*Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were famous “first-wave” American feminists. **They** were also both involved in the Abolitionist movement.*

In speech, though, we early twenty-first century Americans commonly use “they” to refer to a singular referent. According to many grammar experts, that usage is incorrect, but here’s an example of how it sounds in our everyday speech:

*If **a student** wants to learn more about gender inequality, **they** should take Intro to Women’s Studies.*

Note that in this example, “a student” is singular, but it is replaced in the second sentence by “they,” a plural pronoun. In speech, we often don’t notice such substitutions of the plural for the singular, but in writing, some will find such substitutions awkward or incorrect. Some people argue that “they” should become the default gender-neutral pronoun for English writing, but since that usage can still sound awkward to many readers, its best to use “they” only in plural situations. Thus, one other option the gender-savvy writer may choose to employ is to make her/his sentence plural. Here’s one way that can work:

*Many people accept the negative stereotype that **a feminist’s** beliefs are based on **her** hatred of men.*

can become

*Many people accept the negative stereotype that **feminists** base **their** beliefs on hatred of men.*

2. Use *she* or *he* or *she/he*.

Another, simpler option the gender-savvy writer can use to deal with situations in which the gender of the referent is unknown or variable is to write out both pronoun options as “she or he” or “she/he”. For example,

*Each **student** who majors in Women’s Studies major must take a course in Feminist Theory. **She or he** may also get course credit for completing an internship at a local organization that benefits women.*

OR

*Each **student** who majors in Women’s Studies major must take a course in Feminist Theory. **She/he** may also get course credit for completing an internship at a local organization that benefits women.*

3. Alternate genders and pronouns

You may also choose to alternate gendered pronouns. This option will work only in certain situations, though—usually hypothetical situations in which the referent is equally likely to be a male or a female. For example, both male and female students use the Writing Center’s services, so the author of our staff manual chose to alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns when writing the following tutoring guidelines:

- Respond as a reader, explaining what and how you were/are thinking as you read her texts so that she can discover where a reader might struggle with her writing.
- Ask him to outline the draft to reveal the organization of the paper.
- Ask her to describe her purpose and audience and show how she has taken them into account in her writing.
- Explain a recurring pattern and let him locate repeated instances of it.

Of course, this author could also have included both pronouns in each sentence by writing “her/his” or “her/him,” but in this case, alternating “he” and “she” conveys the same sense of gender variability and is likely a little easier on the reader, who won’t have to pause to process several different options every time a gendered pronoun is needed in the sentence. This example also provides a useful demonstration of how gender-savvy writers can take advantage of the many different options available by choosing the one that best suits the unique requirements of each piece of writing they produce.

4. Eliminate the pronoun altogether

Finally, you can also simply eliminate the pronoun. For example,

*Allan Johnson is a contemporary feminist theorist. This **writer and professor** gave a speech at UNC in the fall of 2007.*

Note how the sentence used “this writer and professor” rather than “he.”

*Many people accept the negative stereotype that if a person is a feminist, **she** must hate men.*

could become

*Many people accept the negative stereotype that **feminist beliefs** are based on hatred of men.*

Note how the second version of the sentence talks about the beliefs. By avoiding using the pronoun “she,” it leaves open the possibility that men may be feminists.

Gendered nouns

Like gendered pronouns, gendered nouns can also provide a stumbling block for the gender-savvy writer. The best way to avoid implications these words can carry is simply to be aware of how we tend to use them in speech and writing. Because gendered nouns are so commonly used and accepted by English writers and speakers, we often don’t notice them or the implications they bring with them. Once you’ve recognized that a gender distinction is being made by such a word, though, conversion of the gendered noun into a gender-savvy one is usually very simple.

“Man” and words ending in “-man” are the most commonly used gendered nouns, so avoiding the confusion they bring can be as simple as watching out for these words and replacing them with words that convey your meaning more effectively. For example, if the founders of America had been gender-savvy writers, they might have written “. . . all people are created equal” instead of “. . . all men are created equal . . .”

Another common gendered expression, particularly in informal speech and writing, is “you guys.” This expression is used to refer to groups of men, groups of women, and groups that include both men and women. Although most people *mean* to be inclusive when they use “you guys,” this phrase wouldn’t make sense if it didn’t subsume women under the category “guys.” To see why “you guys” is gendered male, consider that “a guy” (singular) is definitely a man, not a woman, and that most men would not feel included in the expression “you gals” or “you girls.”

Another example of gendered language is the way the words “Mr.,” “Miss,” and “Mrs.” are used. “Mr.” can refer to any man, regardless of whether he is single or married—but women are defined by their relationship to men (by whether they are married or not). A way around this is to use “Ms.” (which doesn’t indicate marital status) to refer to women.

Sometimes we modify nouns that refer to jobs or positions to denote the sex of the person holding that position. This is often done if the sex of the person holding the position goes against conventional expectations. To get a sense of these expectations, think about what sex you would instinctively assume the subject of each of these sentences to be:

The doctor walked into the room.

The nurse walked into the room.

Many people assume that doctors are men and that nurses are women. Because of such assumptions, someone might write sentences like “The female doctor walked into the room” or “The male nurse walked into the room.” Using “female” and “male” in this way reinforces the assumption that most or all doctors are male and most or all nurses are female. Unless the sex of the nurse or doctor is important to the meaning of the sentence, it can be omitted.

As you work on becoming a gender-savvy writer, you may find it helpful to watch out for the following gendered nouns and replace them with one of the alternatives listed below. Check a thesaurus for alternatives to gendered nouns not included in this list.

Gendered noun versus gender-neutral noun

man, person or individual
freshman, first-year student
mankind, humanity
man-made, machine-made
chairman, chair
mailman, postal worker
policeman, police officer
stewardess, flight attendant
congressman, representative
Dear Sir:, Dear Service Representative:

Proper nouns

Proper nouns can also give gender-savvy writers pause, but as with common nouns, it is usually very easy to use gender-neutral language once you’ve noticed the gendered patterns in your own writing. And the best way to avoid any confusion in your use of proper nouns is to use the same rules to discuss women subjects as you already use when you’re writing about men. In the examples below, notice how using different conventions for references to male and female subjects suggests a difference in the amount of respect being given to individuals on the basis of their gender.

1. Refer to women subjects by only their last names—just as you would do for men subjects.

For example, we would never refer to William Shakespeare as just “William;” we call him “Shakespeare” or “William Shakespeare.” Thus, you should never refer to Jane Austen simply as “Jane;” you should write “Jane Austen” or “Austen.”

2. In circumstances where you’re writing about several people who have the same last name, try using the full name of the person every time you refer to him/her.

For example, if you’re writing about George and Martha Washington, referring to him as “Washington” and her as “Martha” conveys a greater respect for him than for her. In order to express an equal amount of respect for these two historical figures, simply refer to each subject by her/his full name: “George Washington” and “Martha Washington.” This option may sound like it could get too wordy, but it actually works very well in most situations.

3. Refer to women subjects by their full titles, just as you would refer to men subjects.

For example, you wouldn't call American President Reagan "Ronald," so you wouldn't want to refer to British Prime Minister Thatcher as "Margaret." Simply call her "Prime Minister Thatcher," just as you would write "President Reagan" to refer to him.

Sex versus gender

In many women's studies classes, one of the fundamental concepts students are expected to master is the difference feminists see between an individual's sex (which feminists understand as one's biological makeup—male, female, or intersexed) and that person's gender (a social construction based on sex—man/masculine or woman/feminine). Because this distinction is so fundamental to understanding much of the material in many Women's Studies courses, expressing the difference between sex and gender is an important element in many writing assignments given by women's studies instructors.

Essentially, all you need to express sex vs. gender distinctions accurately in your writing is a clear understanding of the difference between sex and gender. As you are writing, ask yourself whether what you're talking about is someone's biological makeup or something about the way that person has been socialized. If you're referring to biology, use "male" or "female," and if what you're talking about has to do with a behavior or social role someone has been taught because of her/his biology, use "woman" or "man."

Thinking about the different answers to these two questions might help clarify the distinction between sex and gender:

What does it mean to be male?

What does it mean to be a man?

"To be male," as an expression of biological sex, is to have a chromosomal makeup of XY. "To be a man," however, expresses the socially constructed aspects of masculinity. Ideas of masculinity change across time, culture, and place. Think about the differences between what it meant "to be a man" in 17th-century France versus what it means "to be a man" today in the United States.

Checklist for gender revisions

To ensure that you've used gender savvy language in your piece of writing, try asking yourself the following questions:

1. Have you used "man" or "men" or words containing one of them to refer to people who may be female? If so, consider substituting another word. For example, instead of "fireman," try "firefighter."
2. If you have mentioned someone's gender, was it necessary to do so? If you identify someone as a female architect, for example, do you (or would you) refer to someone else as a "male architect"? And if you then note that the woman is an attractive blonde mother of two, do you mention that the man is a muscular, square-jawed father of three? Unless gender and related matters—looks, clothes, parenthood—are relevant to your point, leave them unmentioned.
3. Do you use any occupational stereotypes? Watch for the use of female pronouns for elementary school teachers and male ones for scientists, for example.
4. Do you use language that in any way shows a lack of respect for either sex?
5. Have you used "he," "him," "his," or "himself" to refer to people who may be female?

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