Gender-sensitive Communication

Avoid irrelevant information about gender

When you are speaking or writing about occupations, do not provide irrelevant information about people’s gender. Doing this supports the stereotype that the ‘normal’ version of this profession is gendered. For example, saying ‘female lawyer’ implies that lawyers are normally male.

For this reason terms such as female professor or male nurse should not be used. Instead you should simply use the occupation title with no gender description.

Examples

Gender-insensitive language
The eco-action group chairman Moni Patel works closely with the chairman of the social action committee Matthieu Dubios to plan events.

Gender-neutral language
The eco-action group chair Moni Patel works closely with the chair/chairperson of the social action committee Matthieu Dubois to plan events.

Gender-insensitive language
Priti is a career woman*.

Gender-sensitive language
Priti is focused on her career.

* The term career woman is gender-discriminatory and should never be used. It carries extra information that suggests it is unusual for a woman to be career-focused and is insulting to women – one never hears of a ‘career man’.
Another common way that gender is included in writing about people when it is not relevant is through using gendered nouns. These are nouns which imply the gender of the person (e.g. policeman and policewoman). Avoid using these nouns to describe people and use something gender neutral instead (e.g. police officer).

Tip: There is usually no reason to include someone’s gender when speaking about a professional – just leave it out!

See Practical Tools for a list of common gendered nouns and some alternatives.