



Hochschule Reutlingen
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Guidelines

**for using gender-sensitive language
in communication, research
and administration**

Introduction

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 American Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal” and most people were taught to understand that the word “men” in this context includes both male and female Americans.

In recent decades, however, as women have become increasingly involved in the various spheres of public life, work and science, writers, speakers and researchers have reconsidered the way they express gender identities and relationships. Because most readers and listeners no longer understand the word “man” to be synonymous with “people”, one must think more carefully about the ways one expresses gender in order to convey ideas clearly and accurately. Moreover, there is a connection between our language use and our social reality. If we “erase” women from language, this makes it easier to maintain gender inequality.

Our language choices have consequences. If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, we should think seriously about how to reflect that belief in our language use. Thankfully, there are a number of different strategies that one can use to express gender relationships with accuracy.

Suggestions for using gender-sensitive language

1. Use the plural form for both nouns and pronouns.

Example:

Each student should come to class with his assignments completed.

→ *All students should come to class with their assignments completed.*

2. Omit the pronoun altogether.

Example:

Each professor should send one of his assistants to the conference.

→ *Each professor should send one assistant to the conference.*

3. Use “his or her”, “he/she” or “s/he” when you occasionally need to stress the action of an individual. Such references won’t be awkward unless they are used frequently.

Example:

If you must use a technical term he may not understand, explain it.

→ *If you must use a technical term he or she may not understand, explain it.*

4. Vary your choice of pronouns when you want to give examples that emphasize the action of an individual. Ideally, choose pronouns that work counter to prevailing stereotypes.

Examples:

Gradually, a child will see the resemblance between block creations and objects in his world, and he will begin to name some structures, like “house” and “door”.

→ *Gradually, a child will see the resemblance between block creations and objects in her world, and she will begin to name some structures, like “house” and “door”.*

The kitchen can serve as a center for new experiences, an interesting place where important things happen, and where she has a chance to learn about the way adult things are done.

→ *The kitchen can serve as a center for new experiences, an interesting place where important things happen, and where he has a chance to learn about the way adult things are done.*

5. Switch from the third person (he) to the second person (you) when this shift is appropriate.

Example:

Each employee should report his progress to the supervisor by June 1.

→ *You should report your progress to the supervisor by June 1.*

6. Use “they”.

This option is much debated by grammar experts, but most agree that it works well in several kinds of situations. “They” is traditionally used only to refer to a plural noun. In speech, however, early 21st century English speakers commonly use “they” to refer to a singular person. According to many grammar experts, that usage is incorrect, but here is an example of how it sounds in our everyday speech:

If a student wants to learn more about gender inequality, they should take a look at the university’s equal opportunities website.

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. In writing, however, some will find such substitutions awkward or incorrect. As such, it is best to use “they” mainly in plural situations. Here is one way this can work:

A student’s beliefs about gender equality may be based on what he has heard in the popular media.

→ *Students’ beliefs about gender equality may be based on what they have heard in the popular media.*

7. Practice using gender neutral nouns.

Examples:

Traditional	Alternative
Business man or business woman	Executive, manager or business person
Mankind	Humanity
Man	Individual
Policeman	Police officer
Chairman	Chair or chairperson
Repairman	Technician
Fireman	Firefighter
Freshman	First-year student
Spokesman	Spokesperson
Frenchmen	The French
Man-made	Artificial, synthetic or manufactured
Manpower	Staff, workforce or personnel
Alumni	Graduates

Further examples can be found at <http://www.servicegrowth.net/documents/Examples%20of%20Gender-Sensitive%20Language.net.pdf> (Retrieved June 1, 2012).

References

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