

THE WRITING CENTER • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Gender-Inclusive Language

What this handout is about

This handout will help you make decisions about using gendered language in your writing.

What is gendered language, and why should you be aware of it?

You have probably encountered documents that use masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to subject(s) whose gender is unclear or variable, or to groups that contain people who are not actually men. For example, the U.S. Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal.” Generations of Americans have been taught that in this context, the word “men” should be read as including both men and women. Other common instances of gendered language include words that assume connections between jobs or roles and gender (like “policeman”) and language conventions that differ depending on the gender of the person being discussed (like using titles that indicate a person’s marital status).

English has changed since the Declaration of Independence was written. Most readers no longer understand the word “man” to be synonymous with “person,” so clear communication requires writers to be more precise. And using gender-neutral language has become standard practice in both journalistic and academic writing, as you’ll see if you consult the style manuals for different academic disciplines (APA, MLA, and Chicago, for example).

Tackling gendered references in your writing can be challenging, especially since there isn’t (and may never be) a universally agreed upon set of concrete guidelines on which to base your decisions. But there are a number of different strategies you can “mix and match” as necessary.

Gendered nouns

“Man” and words ending in “-man” are the most commonly used gendered nouns in English. These words are easy to spot and replace with more neutral language, even in contexts where many readers strongly expect the gendered noun. For example, Star Trek writers developing material for contemporary viewers were able to create a more inclusive version of the famous phrase “where no man has gone before” while still preserving its pleasing rhythm: Star Trek explorers now venture “where no one has gone before.”

Here’s a list of gendered nouns and some alternatives listed below. Check a thesaurus for alternatives to gendered nouns not included in this list.

Gendered noun	Gender-neutral noun
man	person, individual
mankind	people, human beings, humanity
freshman	first-year student
man-made	machine-made, synthetic, artificial
the common man	the average person
chairman	chair, chairperson, coordinator, head
mailman	mail carrier, letter carrier, postal worker
policeman	police officer
steward, stewardess	flight attendant
actor, actress	actor
congressman	legislator, congressional representative
Sir (in "Dear Sir," etc.)	Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Editor, Dear Members of the Search Committee, To Whom it May Concern

Sometimes writers modify nouns that refer to jobs or positions to indicate the sex of the person holding that position. This happens most often when the sex of the person goes against conventional expectations. For example, some people may assume, perhaps unconsciously, that doctors are men and that nurses are women. Sentences like "The female doctor walked into the room" or "The male nurse walked into the room" reinforce such assumptions. Unless the sex of the subject is important to the meaning of the sentence, it should be omitted. (Here's an example where the health care professional's sex might be relevant: "Some women feel more comfortable seeing female gynecologists.")

Titles and names

Another example of gendered language is the way the titles "Mr.," "Miss," and "Mrs." are used. "Mr." can refer to any man, regardless of whether he is single or married, but "Miss" and "Mrs." define women by whether they are married, which until quite recently meant defining them by their relationships with men. A simple alternative when addressing or referring to a woman is "Ms." (which doesn't indicate marital status).

Another note about titles: some college students are in the habit of addressing most women older than them, particularly teachers, as “Mrs.,” regardless of whether the woman in question is married. It’s worth knowing that many female faculty and staff (including married women) prefer to be addressed as “Ms.” or, if the term applies, “Professor” or “Dr.”

Writers sometimes refer to women using only their first names in contexts where they would typically refer to men by their full names, last names, or titles. But using only a person’s first name is more informal and can suggest a lack of respect. For example, in academic writing, we don’t refer to William Shakespeare as “William” or “Will”; we call him “Shakespeare” or “William Shakespeare.” So we should refer to Jane Austen as “Austen” or “Jane Austen,” not just “Jane.”

Similarly, in situations where you would refer to a man by his full title, you should do the same for a woman. For example, if you wouldn’t speak of American President Reagan “Ronald” or “Ronnie,” avoid referring to British Prime Minister Thatcher as “Margaret” or “Maggie.”

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 “Juan”), feminine nouns (“she” can replace “Keisha”), and neutral/non-human nouns (“it” can stand in for “a tree”). But English offers no widely-accepted pronoun choice for gender-neutral, third-person singular nouns that refer to people (“the writer,” “a student,” or “someone”). As we discussed at the beginning of this handout, the practice of using masculine pronouns (“he,” “his,” “him”) as the “default” is outdated and will confuse or offend many readers.

So what can you do when you’re faced with one of those gender-neutral or gender-ambiguous language situations? You have several options.

1. Use more than one pronoun

In situations where a pronoun needs to refer to a person whose gender isn’t known, writers sometimes use “he or she” or “he/she” (or even “s/he”), “her/him,” etc., as we did in the example just above. Putting the masculine form first is more conventional; “she or he” may distract readers but does make the point that women are not just being added onto the generic “he.”

Here are some examples:

When the winner has been selected, she or he will be advanced to the next round of the competition.

OR

Our agreement is that the first person who picks up his or her cell phone must treat the rest of the group to dinner.

While this solution specifically includes women and men and works well in many situations, some readers find it stylistically awkward, especially when “she or he” or “she/he” is repeated many times throughout a piece of writing. Also, by going out of its way to refer to multiple genders, this approach risks calling attention to gender in situations where it’s not relevant. And using “she or he” or similar constructions can also inadvertently exclude people who do not refer to themselves using either pronoun.

2. Alternate genders and pronouns

Another strategy for gender-aware writers is alternating genders, using masculine pronouns in some places and feminine ones in others. This option will work only in certain situations, though—usually hypothetical situations in which the referent is equally likely to be male or female. For example, students of all genders use the Writing Center’s services, so the author of our staff manual chose to alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns when writing the items in a list of guidelines for writing coaches:

Ask her to describe her purpose and audience and show how she has taken them into account in her writing.

Respond as a reader, explaining what you were thinking as you read his text so that he can discover where a reader might struggle with his writing.

Of course, our staff manual writer had other options, like including both pronouns in each sentence by using “her/his” or “her/him.” In this case, though, 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.

Another approach would be to simply repeat “the student,” but “ask the student to describe the student’s purpose and audience and show how the student has taken them into account in the student’s writing” doesn’t sound very good. The writer could have used plural forms, like “respond as a reader, explaining what you were thinking as you read their texts so that they can discover where a reader might struggle with their writing,” but that sentence doesn’t capture the emphasis on one-on-one conversation between writing coach and writer. The switch to “a reader” is jarring when the other nouns are plural. And the writing coach is a particular reader, not a representative for all readers, so switching to “where readers might struggle” doesn’t work.

Our staff manual writer’s situation is a great example of how useful it is to know several strategies so you can choose the one that best fits your current writing context.

3. Try making the nouns and pronouns plural

If it works for your particular sentence, using plural forms is often an excellent option. Here’s an example of a sentence that can easily be rephrased:

A student who loses too much sleep may have trouble focusing during [his/her] exams.

If we make “student” plural and adjust the rest of the sentence accordingly, there’s no need for gendered language (and no confusion or loss of meaning):

Students who lose too much sleep may have trouble focusing during their exams.

4. Use “they” as a singular pronoun

Most of the time, the word “they” refers to a plural antecedent. For example,

Because experienced hikers know that weather conditions can change rapidly, they often dress in layers.

But using “they” with a singular antecedent is not a new phenomenon, and while it remains uncommon in formal writing, it has become quite common in speech. In a conversation, many people would not even notice how “they” is being used here:

Look for the rental car company’s representative at the airport exit; they will be holding a sign with your name on it.

Some people are strongly opposed to the use of “they” with singular antecedents and are likely to react badly to writing that uses this approach. Others argue that “they” should be adopted as English’s standard third-person, gender-neutral pronoun in all writing and speaking contexts. Keep your audience in mind as you decide whether the singular “they” is a good solution for any gender-related problems in your writing.

What if you’re not sure of someone’s gender?

You may sometimes find yourself needing to refer to a person whose gender you’re uncertain of. Perhaps you are writing a paper about the creator of an ancient text or piece of art whose identity (and therefore gender) is unknown—for example, we are not certain who wrote the 6th-century epic poem “Beowulf.” Perhaps you’re participating in an online discussion forum where the participants are known only by usernames like “PurpleOctopus25” or “I Love Big Yellow Fish.” You could be writing about someone you don’t personally know whose name is not clearly associated with a particular gender—someone named Sam Smith might be Samuel, Samantha, Samson, or something else—or the person’s name might be in a language you’re unfamiliar with (for example, if English is the only language you speak and read, you might have difficulty guessing the gender associated with a Chinese name). Or maybe you’re discussing a person whose gender identity has changed (like when athlete Bruce Jenner, who was previously regarded as a man, became Caitlyn Jenner, a woman) or is fluid. Perhaps your subject does not fit neatly into the categories of “man” and “woman” or rejects those categories entirely.

In these situations, you may not be able to use “he” or “she”—but “they” also feels a little odd, since you are talking about a specific individual. **Here are some strategies to try in such cases:**

- Refer to the person using a descriptive word or phrase: the writer of Beowulf is frequently referred to as “The Beowulf poet” or (in contexts where “Beowulf” is the only poem being discussed) “the poet.”
- If the person is known to you only by a username, repeat the username or follow the standard practices of the forum—PurpleOctopus25 might become Purple or P.O. in subsequent references. (Advice columnists often use a similar strategy; if “I Love Big Yellow Fish” wrote to ask for advice, the columnist’s response might begin with “Dear Fish Lover.”)
- If the person’s name is known, keep using the name rather than substituting a pronoun. Rephrase as necessary to reduce the number of times you must repeat it: “Blogger Sam Smith’s cats have apparently destroyed Smith’s furniture, stolen Smith’s sandwiches, and terrorized Smith, Smith’s dogs, and Smith’s housemate” could become “Blogger Sam Smith’s cats have apparently destroyed couches, stolen sandwiches, and terrorized their human and canine housemates.”
- Do a little research: if you are writing about a public figure of any kind, chances are that others have also written about that person; you may be able to follow their lead. If you see multiple practices, imitate the ones that seem most respectful.

If you’re writing about someone you are in contact with, you can ask how that person would like to be referred to.

What about the content of the paper?

Much discussion about gendered language focuses on choosing the right words, but the kinds of information writers include or omit can also convey values and assumptions about gender. For example, think about the ways Barack and Michelle Obama have been presented in the media. Have you seen many discussions of Barack’s weight, hairstyle, and clothing? Many readers and viewers have pointed out that the appearance of female public figures (not just politicians, but actors, writers, activists, athletes, etc.) is discussed more often, more critically, and in far more detail than the appearance of men in similar roles. This pattern suggests that women’s appearance matters more than men’s does and is interesting and worthy of attention, regardless of the context.

Similarly, have you ever noticed patterns in the way that men’s and women’s relationships with their families are discussed (in person, online, or elsewhere)? When someone describes what a male parent does for his children as “babysitting” or discusses family leave policies without mentioning how they apply to men, you may wonder whether the speaker or writer is assuming that men are not interested in caring for their children.

These kinds of values and assumptions about gender can weaken arguments. In many of your college writing assignments, you’ll be asked to analyze something (an issue, text, event, etc.) and make an evidence-based argument about it. Your readers will critique your arguments in part by assessing the values and assumptions your claims rely on. They may look for evidence of bias, overgeneralization, incomplete knowledge, and so forth. Critically examining the role that gender has played in your decisions about the content of your paper can help you make stronger, more effective arguments that will be persuasive to a wide variety of readers, no matter what your topic is or what position you take.

Checklist for gender-related revisions

As you review your writing, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have you used “man” or “men” or words containing them to refer to people who may not be men?
2. Have you used “he,” “him,” “his,” or “himself” to refer to people who may not be men?
3. If you have mentioned someone’s sex or gender, was it necessary to do so?
4. Do you use any occupational (or other) stereotypes?
5. Do you provide the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people of different genders?

Perhaps the best test for gender-inclusive language is to imagine a diverse group of people reading your paper. Would each reader feel respected? Envisioning your audience is a critical skill in every writing context, and revising with a focus on gendered language is a perfect opportunity to practice.

Works consulted

Publication manual of the American Psychological Association. 6th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010.

The Chicago Manual of Style. 17th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.



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