

2.4.22: Bias-Free Writing

Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies to avoid language that shows bias against individuals or populations

Why does the topic of bias-free writing follow a page about hidden meaning? Business writers work to be clear and direct in meaning, and drawing attention to details about race, age, country of origin, disability, and gender in the workplace might cause conscious or unconscious bias.

Let's look at some examples and ways to fix them. A simple rule for bias-free writing is to consider whether personal details need to be included to get the point across.

Avoid	Try
Franklin is the new African-American accountant.	Franklin is the new accountant.
For someone nearing retirement, she caught on to that new software quickly.	She caught on to that new software quickly.
Abdul has some of the highest call center ratings, even though his Saudi accent is strong.	Abdul has some of the highest call center ratings.
John is one of our most active employees, even though he must use a wheelchair.	John is one of our most active employees.
Did the cleaning woman bring new trash bags?	Did the cleaner bring new trash bags?
Do we have enough manpower to finish this project?	Do we have enough workforce to finish this project?

Avoiding Gender Bias

Writing in a non-sexist way requires the ability to recognize sexism in the first place. The next hurdle is to figure out a way to eliminate any inherent sexism without disrupting the flow of the piece. Here are a few techniques to help avoid bias.

Gendered Nouns

The first way to avoid gender bias in your writing is to use gender-neutral words when referring individuals in various positions:

Avoid	Try
businessman, businesswoman	business executive
chairman, chairwoman	chairperson
the common man	the average person
salesman, saleswoman	salesperson, sales clerk, marketer

Gendered Pronouns

The next thing to be aware of is your use of gendered pronouns. While some still use *he* as a generic pronoun, this shows a strong bias towards male individuals. Instead you can use "he or she" ("his or her," etc) as the pronoun for a generic noun:

Avoid	Try
Every employee should file his report by the end of the day.	Every employee should file his or her report by the end of the day.
When filing the report, each employee should make sure he included yesterday's data.	When filing the report, each employee should make sure he or she included yesterday's data.

Using “he or she” is an okay solution, but it can get clunky in large doses: “Every employee should check with his or her supervisor that his or her report was properly filed.” Additionally, many individuals neither identify as male nor female and use *they* as a singular pronoun to refer to themselves. Thus, using “he or she” is often not the best solution. The best solution is often to rephrase the sentence to have a plural subject instead of a singular subject.

Avoid	Try
Every employee should file his report by the end of the day.	All employees should file their reports by the end of the day.
When filing the report, each employee should make sure he or she included yesterday’s data.	When filing the report, employees should make sure they included yesterday’s data.
Any author knows that his first draft of a piece won’t be good.	All authors know that their first drafts won’t be good.

? Singular *They*

While *they* is typically treated as a plural pronoun, when an individual has expressed a desire to be identified with gender-neutral pronouns (*they/their/theirs*), it is grammatically correct to use *they* as a singular pronoun (per the *Chicago Manual of Style*, one of the predominant authorities on grammar and style).^[1]

There are occasions, however, where you can’t simply make the sentence plural. For example, let’s look at this sentence: “Someone will call you to further discuss the issue. He or she will call between 9:00 and 10:00 tomorrow morning.” Only one person will be making the call, so we can’t make this sentence plural. In this situation, the solution may be to completely omit the pronoun: “Someone will call you to further discuss the issue. You can expect the call between 9:00 and 10:00 tomorrow morning.”

Avoiding Race and Ethnicity Bias

When speaking about a racial or ethnic group, deciding which term to use can be a tricky subject because the ascribed meaning to particular terms and labels can frequently change. When choosing between terms to refer to a group, it is best to ask a member of that group what they prefer.

As a general rule in a business setting, do not mention a person’s race or ethnicity unless it is directly relevant to the situation.

Avoiding Disability Bias

As a general rule, avoid using labeled nouns when talking about people with disabilities. Try to use emotionally neutral expressions rather than ones that assign a role, such as *victim*.

Avoid	Try
the disabled	the people with disabilities
the schizophrenic	the person diagnosed with schizophrenia
an AIDS victim	a person with AIDS
a person suffering from epilepsy	a person with epilepsy

A link to an interactive elements can be found at the bottom of this page.

1. The University of Chicago Press. "Grammar & Usage: Singular 'they'." *Chicago Manual of Style*, 2017, p. 241.

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