

1.6.3: Using Gender Neutral Language

Learning Objectives

- Discuss different strategies to use gender neutral language in business communication



The use of gender-neutral language is now considered standard practice, incorporated in the APA (American Psychological Association) and other style guides that are the linguistic “bibles” for journalists, academics, and students. Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab is an excellent writing resource; their [APA Stylistics: Avoiding Bias](#) page links to further discussion and specific recommendations for how to appropriately represent people in your writing, including sections on Disabilities, Race & Ethnicity, and Sex and Gender.

In order to achieve a more gender-inclusive end, [The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) recommends focusing on three areas: gendered nouns, titles and names, and pronouns. Specific recommendations and examples:

1. **Replace gendered nouns with more neutral language.** This can be challenging, in particular when there is an established expectation or association. In updating the Star Trek franchise, writers replaced the “where no man has gone before” tagline with the more inclusive “where no one has gone before,” retaining both the rhythm and promise of the iconic phrase.
2. **Choose equitable titles and names.** To illustrate, use Ms. or other appropriate title (Professor, Dr., etc.) that doesn’t define a woman in terms of her relationship with a man. In both written and verbal contexts, give a woman the same respect as you would a man. For example, using both a first and last name or title and last name rather than an informal first name.
3. **Use pronouns equitably.** As mentioned above, using masculine pronouns (“he,” “his,” “him”) as the “default” is no longer an accepted practice. Instead, consider the following options:
 - **Use more than one pronoun:** If you don’t know the gender of the person the pronoun refers to, use “he or she” or her/him. Note: Be aware of your audience; using “he or she” may exclude people who do not relate to either pronoun. In that case, you may want to use a more inclusive, albeit rather lengthy, “he/she/they.”
 - **Alternate genders and pronouns:** If the person being referred to could be either female or male, alternate using the masculine and feminine pronouns. Be sure to do this in a way that doesn’t confuse your listener/reader by making it sound as though multiple people are involved when there’s just one.
 - **Make your nouns and pronouns plural:** This sidesteps the gender issue for your audience by making it sound as if there is more than one. For example, he or she becomes they.
 - **Use “they” as a singular pronoun:** Although “they” generally refers to a plural antecedent—that is, is used as a plural pronoun—it is also used as a gender-neutral pronoun. Again, know your audience.

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