

JCCC The Writing Center

Non-Sexist Language

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) suggests the following guidelines:

Generic Use

Although MAN in its original sense carried the dual meaning of adult human and adult male, its meaning has come to be so closely identified with adult male that the generic use of MAN and other words with masculine markers should be avoided.

Examples

mankind
man's achievements
man-made
the common man
man the stockroom
nine man-hours

Alternatives

humanity, people, human beings
human achievements
synthetic, manufactured, machine-made
the average person, ordinary people
staff the stockroom
nine staff-hours

Occupations

Avoid the use of MAN in occupational terms when persons holding the job could be either male or female.

Examples

chairman

businessman
fireman
mailman
steward and stewardess
policeman and policewoman
congressman

Alternatives

coordinator (of a committee or department), moderator (of a meeting), presiding officer, head, chair
business executive
firefighter
mail carrier
flight attendant
police officer
congressional representative

Pronouns

Because English has no generic singular--or common-sex--pronoun, we have used HE, HIS, and HIM in such expressions as "the student needs HIS pencil." When we constantly personify "the judge," "the critic," "the executive," "the author," and so forth, as male by using the pronoun HE, we are subtly conditioning ourselves against the idea of a female judge, critic, executive, or author. There are several alternative approaches for ending the exclusion of women that results from the pervasive use of masculine pronouns.

a. Recast into the plural.

Example

Give each student his paper as soon as he is finished.

Alternative

Give students their papers as soon as they are finished.

b. Reword to eliminate gender problems.

Example

The average student is worried about his grade.

Alternative

The average student is worried about grades.

c. Replace the masculine pronoun with ONE, YOU, or (sparingly) HE OR SHE, as appropriate.

Example

If the student was satisfied with his performance on the pretest, he took the post-test.

Alternative

A student who was satisfied with her or his performance on the pretest took the post-test.

d. Alternate male and female examples and expressions. (Be careful not to confuse the reader.)

Example

Let each student participate. Has he had a chance to talk? Could he feel left out?

Alternative

Let each student participate. Has she had a chance to talk? Could he feel left out?

Indefinite Pronouns

Using the masculine pronouns to refer to an indefinite pronoun (everybody, everyone, anybody, anyone) also has the effect of excluding women. In all but strictly formal uses, plural pronouns have become acceptable substitutes for the masculine singular.

Example

Anyone who wants to go to the game should bring his money tomorrow.

Alternative

Anyone who wants to go to the game should bring their money tomorrow.

*This handout is from the [Purdue University Online Writing Lab](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_nonsex.html)
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