

Avoiding Gender Bias in Writing

- What is inclusive language?
The way you phrase a message is often as important as the message itself. The practice of using inclusive language is something more than remembering a list of grammatical and stylistic "things to avoid"-it is a commitment to thoughtfully choose words that will make all people feel welcomed. We want to include not exclude.
- Why bother to avoid gender-specific language?
Traditionally, writers in the English language have used masculine identifiers and pronouns to address the idea of the "Universal Singular"-terms like "mankind," "men of faith" "Master"-and so on. For centuries, the patriarchal system of English and American society was reinforced by the use of the pronoun referent "he." Because of the use of masculine language, women were, in the main, considered less than men or simply not considered at all. Our language shapes our culture-and to be systematically denied recognition has a rather disenfranchising effect on women.

The minister of a local church once said, "We need to elect a property chairman so that he can get the church's roof fixed!" Only men can chair committees? Are males the only gender capable of picking up the phone and contacting a roofer?

- How can you avoid using gender-specific language?
First, recognize that your inclination to write in the masculine doesn't make you a creep. Most likely, it is the language of your younger years and may be most familiar and comfortable to you. Focus on getting your main ideas down on paper in the brainstorming and early drafting stages of your writing process, saving inclusive language issues for your revision time so that you don't forget your salient points.
- Revising for inclusiveness can follow several methods.

Common, but ineffective, solutions

- You may certainly substitute the phrase "he or she" and its variations for "he," but this can become cumbersome in longer texts.
- What about slash words like s/he or he/she? Never, never use. This is just too awkward.

Preferable methods

- Rewrite sentences from the singular pronoun into the plural: "carpenters" or "theologians" and "they." Remember that you will have to change the verbs from

singular to plural as well. This is often a good choice because it prompts the writer to choose highly specific, concrete referents.

- Most of the time the sentence or phrase can be rewritten in order to leave out the pronoun.

Consider these possibilities:

A theology student has little time to read outside his/her studies.

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A theology student has little time to read outside his/her studies.

Theology students have little time to read outside their studies.

Theology students have little time to read outside of studying