

UNBIASED LANGUAGE

Recent social changes have made people think about the ways language sometimes deals disrespectfully with certain groups of people. Common sense and some specific strategies can help you avoid suggesting putdowns where you don't intend them—without twisting your style into knots.

Avoiding *He and She*: Many standard wordings seem to assume that every individual is male. It's clumsy to repeat *he and she*, *him and her*, *his and hers* every time you need a pronoun. The grouping *he/she* is awkward to say. Fortunately, finding alternatives can be as simple as using plural rather than singular, or simply bypassing any pronoun.

SEEMS TO EXCLUDE WOMEN

Man is a tool-building animal.

INCLUSIVE

Humans are tool-building animals.

SEEMS TO EXCLUDE WOMEN

Every artist has learned from those who came before him.

INCLUSIVE BUT AWKWARD

Every artist has learned from those who came before him or her.

INCLUSIVE

Every artist has learned from previous artists.

Dated Quotations: Historical or literary texts don't always follow these principles. You may feel they are distasteful, but accusing them of bias isn't usually worthwhile. In academic writing, do so only if you are sure the original meaning was distorted. Usually you can paraphrase and comment to show your interpretation of the idea you want to cite:

OBTRUSIVE

Pope probably meant more than the male population when he said, "The proper study of mankind [*sic*] is man [*sic*]."

MORE SUBTLE

Pope affirmed the need for human self-awareness when he said, "The proper study of mankind is man."

Confusing the Group and the Individual: Many academic disciplines focus on group behaviour and can describe it precisely. Don't get stuck in the habit, though, of referring to people only as representatives of categories. That's especially important if you're writing about (and perhaps to) individual clients or patients or students.

- Avoid using adjectives as collective nouns: females, natives, gays, Asians, the blind, etc. Nouns like *women* or *blind people* are easy substitutes in most cases.
- Terminology can reflect important distinctions. That's the justification for terms like *hearing-impaired* or *partially sighted*. (A hearing-impaired person has partial hearing, while a profoundly deaf person has none or almost none.)

- On the same principle, consider whether you can give more specific information. How much sight, and what kind, does the person have? Was Gandhi just Asian, or would it be more useful to specify what part of India he came from, and from what caste? In a marketing analysis, too, data about people's behaviour tells you more than stereotypes do.
- Some terms have outlived their usefulness. Again, it's more precise as well as more considerate, to note that a person has a specific syndrome rather than saying he's a dwarf or mentally retarded. Racial terms notoriously change fashion: *black* has gone in and out of favour, for instance, and *native* or *aboriginal* are preferred to *Indian*. As in the case of *gay*, the criterion should be what people in a specific group want to be called. Again, any adjective used as a noun (*a black, a diabetic*) seems to reduce people to one characteristic.

Gendered Labels: Terms that label people simply on the basis of their sex have often gathered negative overtones. They can readily be avoided:

- Feminine forms of words such as *poetess* or *woman doctor* are certainly outdated, since they suggest that a woman in the role of poet or doctor is not the real thing. That's the trouble with *policewoman* and *chairwoman* too. You can nearly always replace such terms with a non-gendered form: *poet, doctor, police officer, chair*.
- Titles like *Mr., Mrs.,* and even the recently invented *Ms.* are less and less used orally in most parts of North America, and their function in writing is small. They are still expected in the salutations of formal letters such as applications (*Dear Ms. Lee*), but are seldom necessary in internal memos. If you're on first-name terms with your reader, address the memo *TO: Sandra Lee* and sign it *FROM: John Pereira*. It's also acceptable to say *Dear Chris Singh* and bypass the question of gender.
- In academic writing, such titles and the honorifics *Professor* and *Doctor* are almost never used except on cover pages. Use only last names when you refer to your sources, even if the authors are eminent authorities. When your writing concentrates on a specific figure, you may want to give the full name on first mention, then revert to last name only: *Emily Dickinson was thoroughly familiar with popular musical forms of her day. . . . In using the ballad stanza, however, Dickinson varies the meter for her own artistic purposes.*

Further References

American Psychological Association. *APA Publication Manual*, 6th ed., Chapter 3.

Miller, Casey and Kate Swift. *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*.

Ontario Ministry of Citizenship. *Word Choices: A Lexicon of Preferred Terms for Disability Issues*.