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Gender-Neutral Language

Overview: There are many reasons you might find it necessary to avoid using gendered pronouns. Most commonly, you will need to use gender-neutral language when referring to a group of people, to a hypothetical person, or to a person belonging to a particular profession. You may also find that you need to write to or about individuals who prefer to be referred to in gender-neutral terms. **Always think carefully about your audience and purpose for writing before deciding whether to use gendered or gender-neutral terms. Thinking critically about what is best for each writing situation will help you choose the appropriate language to ensure that your writing is concise, clear, and appeals to your audience, rather than offending them with what might be perceived as prejudiced or insensitive language.**

Abstract groups of people should be referred to in gender neutral terms.

Example:

Gendered term: For centuries, *mankind* has preserved culture through storytelling.

This sentence could easily be understood as referring only to men, or worse, suggesting that only men matter.

Gender-neutral term: For centuries, *humans* have preserved culture through storytelling.

“*Humans*” is gender-neutral and includes both males and females, which makes the sentence more inclusive.

Professions should always be gender-neutral, since people of any gender are legally protected in their pursuit of any profession. Many formerly gender-specific job titles have been replaced with gender-neutral job titles, and it’s important to make use of these to show your audience you are well-informed and respectful of all people.

Example 1:

Gendered Job Title: Roberta anxiously awaited the arrival of the *mailman*.

Even if this particular postal work does turn out to be male, the term sounds outdated if not sexist. This is particularly true since the gender of the postal worker is not relevant to the sentence.

Gender-neutral Job Title: Roberta anxiously awaited the arrival of the *mail carrier*.

Mail carrier or postal worker are gender neutral and can refer to any postal employee.

Example 2:

Gendered Job Title: During the short flight from Long Beach to Las Vegas, the *stewardesses* offered both coffee and orange juice.

Stewardesses is gendered and appears to only include females.

Male and Female Gendered Job Title: During the short flight from Long Beach to Las Vegas, the *stewardesses and stewards* offered both coffee and orange juice.

This sentence includes both genders with “*stewardesses and stewards*” but is wordy and awkward.

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Gender-neutral Job Title: During the short flight from Long Beach to Las Vegas, the *flight attendants* offered both coffee and orange juice.

This sentence uses the gender-neutral term *flight attendants*. It is the most concise term that includes all people.

Pronouns can be difficult when trying to write in gender-neutral terms because you must remember that pronouns replace nouns and must be consistent in person, number and gender with the nouns they replace. For example, a singular noun can only be replaced by a singular pronoun.

Example 3:

Incorrect Pronoun: **Everybody** who likes animals has **her** favorite.

“Everybody” and “her” are both singular, but “everybody” is gender-neutral while “her” is feminine.

Example 4:

Incorrect Pronoun: **Everybody** who likes animals has **their** favorite.

“Everybody” and “their” are both gender-neutral, but “everybody” is singular and “their” is plural.

To avoid being exclusive, gendered pronouns referring to abstract people must be chosen carefully. There are several possibilities for ensuring gender neutrality and correct grammar when choosing pronouns:

Use both a masculine and a feminine pronoun:

Everybody who likes animals has *his or her* favorite.

A veterinarian should be careful not to become too attached to *his/her* patients.

It may sound a little odd at first, but because “everybody” is singular and gender neutral, we need to use “his or her” in order to allow for both genders but still have singular pronouns. However, there are a few other ways to alter this sentence to avoid using “his or her” if you are uncomfortable with it.

Make the noun plural so that a plural pronoun is correct. (This is often the easiest solution):

All people who like animals have *their* favorites.

Veterinarians should be careful not to become too attached to *their* patients.

Revise the sentence so the pronoun is unnecessary:

People who like animals usually have a favorite.

Many animal lovers favor one in particular.

Veterinarians should take precautions to avoid attachment to the animals they help.

Becoming overly attached to patients is something a veterinarian should avoid.

Alternate male and female pronouns:

In one example, use a feminine pronoun: Everybody who likes animals has *her* favorite.

In the next example, use a male pronoun: A veterinarian should not become too attached to *his* patients.

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Here are some examples of gendered terms which have been replaced with gender-neutral terms:

Gendered:	Gender Neutral:
<i>Fireman</i>	<i>firefighter</i>
<i>Mailman</i>	<i>postal worker</i>
<i>police man</i>	<i>police officer</i>
<i>stewardess/steward</i>	<i>flight attendant</i>
<i>waitress/waiter</i>	<i>server</i>
<i>Businessman</i>	<i>businessperson</i>
<i>actress/actor</i>	<i>actor</i>

Practice: Now look at your own writing. Have you used any gendered nouns or pronouns to refer to abstract people? If so, think carefully about whether your word choices accurately convey your intended meaning and are appropriate for your writing task. Remember that if you are referring to a specific person whose gender you know, it is acceptable and correct to refer to that person in masculine or feminine terms. When referring to someone abstractly, however, use one of the above techniques to avoid marking the person by either gender, or alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns. Remember to always be mindful of each particular writing situation and your intended audience when choosing the most appropriate language for each situation.

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