

How do I use gender-inclusive language?

Why is it important to use gender-inclusive language?

Until fairly recently, it was tradition in English academic writing to use the male form whenever the gender of the person referred to was unclear. It was also standard practice to assume that people of certain professions were of the same gender. Nowadays it is no longer considered acceptable in most mainstream academic settings to assume the gender of the person about whom one is writing. A few simple adaptations to our writing can help us make sure we are treating our contributors and readers in a fair, unbiased manner.

How do I use gender-inclusive pronouns?

There are several options for using gender-inclusive pronouns:

1. To avoid having to choose pronouns, you could use the passive voice. However, because active sentence structures are preferred in many English-language academic disciplines, this may not be the best option for you.

Active: He [the scientist] conducted the experiment in the university laboratory. (gendered)

Passive: The experiment was conducted in the university laboratory. (gender-inclusive)

2. Another option for avoiding tricky singular pronouns is to use plural pronouns whenever possible.

Singular: A student usually does not do his homework on a Friday night. (gendered)

Plural: Students usually do not do their homework on a Friday night. (gender-inclusive)

3. When one does have to use singular pronouns, one way to be gender-inclusive is to write out both the masculine and feminine pronouns: “he or she,” “he/she,” “s/he” or “(s)he.”

When a reader does not know the meaning of a word, he or she can look it up in the dictionary.

4. You can also mix singular pronouns throughout your writing, sometimes using the male form and other times the female form. You can avoid gender bias by making sure there is an equal balance between male and female pronouns in the text.

5. A shorter alternative is to use the more neutral pronoun “one.” However, repetitive use of “one” is not considered good style in English writing.

When one does not know the meaning of a word, one can look it up in the dictionary.

6. Because using the phrase “he or she” can become wordy, many English writers choose to use the pronoun “they” instead. While commonly used in spoken English, “they” has been a controversial alternative to “he/she” because it is a plural pronoun. For this reason, opponents argue that using “they” in a singular context is grammatically incorrect. However, because of its simplicity and gender-neutral character, the use of “they” as a singular pronoun is becoming increasingly accepted, even in academic settings.

When a reader does not know the meaning of a word, they can look it up in the dictionary.

7. Another uncommon approach is the pronoun “ze.” The benefit of “ze” is that it can include all people, not merely those who identify as either male or female. However, because “ze” is rarely used, many readers may find it strange or distracting.

When a reader does not know the meaning of a word, ze can look it up in the dictionary.

You can see the grammatical variations of these pronouns in the table below:

| Subject | Object | Possessive Adjective | Possessive Pronoun | Reflexive |
|---------|---------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| he/she | him/her | his/her | his/hers | himself/herself |
| one | one | one's | one's | oneself |
| they | them | their | theirs | themselves |
| ze | zim | zir | zirs | zirself |

What other gendered nouns should I avoid?

Pronouns are not the only words you need to watch out for when writing in a gender-inclusive fashion. There are many gendered nouns in English that assume either the masculine or feminine gender. The chart below provides a few examples of such nouns and their gender-inclusive alternatives:

| Gendered Nouns | Gender-Inclusive Nouns |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| mankind | humanity/humankind/human beings |
| congressman | congressperson |
| chairman | chair/chairperson |
| policeman | police officer |
| fireman | firefighter |
| stewardess | flight attendant |
| freshman | first year student |

Bibliography/Further Reading:

"Gender-Inclusive Language." The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/gender-inclusive-language/>

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