



Avoiding Biased Language

The You Attitude means avoiding language that discriminates because of gender, age, disability, ethnicity/race, and sexual orientation

We can also avoid biased language that pigeon-holes people for other things besides culture that they don't necessarily have control over, including gender, race, religion, handicaps, and age. Can you see the bias in these sentences?

- ❑ Any applicant for the position of fireman must submit a medical report signed by his physician.
- ❑ Let's try harder to meet our older customers' demands for personalized service.
- ❑ Despite her cerebral palsy, Cheryl Kama was promoted to office manager.

The biggest problem with these sentences is that they focus on something that really has nothing to do with a person's ability to do a job successfully. Here are the sentences, corrected and explained:

- ❑ ~~Any applicant~~ Applicants for the position of ~~fireman~~ firefighter must submit a medical report signed by ~~his~~ their ~~physician~~ physicians
Using the degendered term "firefighter" for the old-fashioned "fireman" and eliminating the sexist "he" pronoun by casting the subject "applicant" into the plural eliminate the maleness of this sentence.
- ❑ Let's try harder to meet our ~~older~~ customers' demands for personalized service.
The word "older" implies that these customers are somehow more unreasonable, and that's certainly not true. After all, don't ALL customers deserve better service?
- ❑ ~~Despite her cerebral palsy,~~ Cheryl Kama was promoted to office manager.
Focusing on Ms. Kama's physical challenges diminishes the dedication and intelligence she must've put into the job to be worthy of her promotion.

1.0 Language Bias Against Gender

Rule 1: Avoid the Generic Use of "He." Avoid the pronoun "he" when both sexes are meant.

1.1. Recast into the plural

Sexist	Non-sexist
Give each student his paper as soon as he is finished.	Give students their papers as soon as they are finished.
(notice that the grammar is correct in the rewrite: students, their , papers = plural. For more on pronoun agreement, see Purdue Owl)	

1.2 Reword to eliminate the "he" pronoun

Sexist	Non-sexist
The average student is worried about his grades.	The average student is worried about grades.

1.3 Replace the masculine pronoun with "you" (as appropriate) or "he or she" (sparingly)
 (note: although "one" is also possible, it is not you-attitude. Find a better alternative)

Sexist	Non-sexist
If the student is dissatisfied with his grade, he can appeal.	A student who is dissatisfied with his/her grade can appeal.

1.4 Alternate male and female expressions

Sexist	Non-sexist
Let each student participate. Has he had a chance to talk? Did he feel left out?	Let each student participate. Has she had a chance to talk? Did he feel left out?

1.5 Use plural indefinite pronouns (definite pronouns are always singular: anyone, anybody, someone, somebody, everyone, everybody, one, each, every)

Sexist	Non-sexist
Anyone who wants to go must bring his money tomorrow.	All those who want to go must bring their money tomorrow.

1.6 Use the double-pronoun construction (use sparingly)

Sexist	Non-sexist
Every person has a right to his opinion.	Every person has a right to his or her opinion.

1.7 Use he/she his/her, etc., in printed contracts and other forms so the inapplicable pronoun can be crossed out.

Rule 2 Avoid Sexist Salutations and Titles

2.1 Use a title or other alternative when you don't know the name of the person you're writing to

Sexist	Non-sexist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dear Sir • Dear Madam • Gentlemen • To Whom it May Concern (not sexist, just not you-attitude) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aloha (only in Hawaii) • Dear Customer/Subscriber/Colleague • Dear Editor/Manager/ Account Executive (job title) • Dear Representative/ Senator (honorary title) • Dear Friend/Neighbor

2.2. Forms of address indicate attitudes about status and worth. Eliminate sexism when addressing persons formally. **Always use 'Ms.' to designate both a married and an unmarried woman, instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs.', even when you know a woman's marital status.**

2.3. **Whenever males are referred to by title, use the appropriate title for female professionals** (Ms., Dr., Professor), rather than their first names. A woman should be referred to by name in the same way that a man is. Both should be called by their full names, by first or last name only, or by title. Children often go by first names while calling adults by surname and title.

Sexist	Non-sexist
Miss Lee , Ms. Char , and Mrs. Feeney	Ms. Lee , Ms. Chai, and Ms. Feeney
Governor Stender and Anna Johnston	Governor Stender and Representative Johnston
Mary, Lee, and Thompson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ohashi, Lee, and Thompson • Mary, Ryan, and Jake

2.4 **Use a married woman's first name instead of her husband's.** Issue invitations or notices, bills, financial statements and other correspondence in the name of each of the individuals concerned.

Sexist	Non-sexist
Mrs. Herman Lee	Ms. Annabelle Lee
Mr .and Mrs. John Tanaka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ellen and John Tanaka • The Tanaka's • The Tanaka Family

2.5 **Use gender-neutral terms for a woman's name before marriage**

Sexist	Non-sexist
maiden name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pre-marital name • birth name

Rule 3: Avoid Infantilization To "infantilize" means to make into an infant. It includes referring to women as *girls, babes, chicks, dolls*, and so forth.

It includes, too, calling, for instance, gay men *mama's boys* or *sissies*. Euphemisms that refer to women and sometimes people of color, gay men and lesbians in language that connotes dependency and immaturity trivialize the people being referred to. The language suggests that the women or others are childlike and don't have to be taken seriously.

At any rate, using infantilizing terms means we aren't treating a person as our equal. Of course, some infantilizing terms (*baby, honey*) are used as terms of endearment and suggest nurturing feelings, but these are used by parents, friends, and romantic partners and have NO place in business correspondence.

Sexist	Non-sexist
I'll have my girl check on that.	I'll have my secretary (or assistant) check on that.
Has the delivery boy arrived yet?	Has the delivery arrived yet?

Rule 3: Use De-gendered Terms

3.1 Use de-gendered terms for both males and females.

Sexist	Non-sexist
hostess	host
actress	actor
waiter/waitress	wait help
steward/stewardess	flight attendant

3.2 De-gender, don't re-gender

Sexist	Non-sexist
chairman = chair woman (re-gendered)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chair • chairperson (de-gendered)

Rule 4: Avoid Sexual Stereotyping

Sexual stereotypes means labeling some roles as predominantly male or female. To assume that all lawyers or bosses or doctors are male ignores the female segment of the profession and reinforces the assumption that only males are "proper" professionals. Moreover, to assume that homemaking, nursing, teaching, and child rearing tasks are the primary concern of all and only women excludes males from these roles, even as it ignores women's other concerns.

4.1 Avoid calling attention to irrelevancies.

Sexist	Non-sexist
male nurse	nurse
male teacher	teacher
female governor	governor
lady lawyer	lawyer
career woman	sales rep, associate, executive
coed	student

4.2 Eliminate the generic use of "man." Replace occupational terms in *man* and *boy*, if possible, with terms include members of either gender

Sexist	Non-sexist
mankind	human beings, people
manpower	staffing

Examples of De-gendered Usage

Sexist	Degendered
brotherhood	community , unity
businessman	business executive or associate, entrepreneur
cameraman	camera operator, photographer
cleaning lady	maid, housekeeper, office cleaner
clergyman	priest, minister , clergy
common man	average person, ordinary people
congressman	member of Congress, representative, legislator
copy boy/girl	messenger, runner
craftsman	craftsman, artist
crewman	crew member
early man, caveman	early humans, early societies
Esquire	Attorney at law, lawyer
fireman	firefighter
forefathers	ancestors, forebears
foreman	supervisor
founding fathers	founders, pioneers
ironman	triathlete
layman	layperson, laity
mailman	mail carrier, letter carrier , postal worker
man (verb)	to staff, run, operate
manhood	adulthood, maturity
man-hours	work hours, staff hours, hours worked
manhunt	a hunt for ...
man-made	artificial, hand made, synthetic, manufactured
manpower	work force, human resources, personnel, workers
middleman	go-between, liaison, agent
policeman	police officer
repairman	repairer
right hand man	assistant, helper
rise of man	rise of the human race, humanity or civilization
salesman	salesperson, sales representative, sales clerk, seller
showman	performer
spokesman	spokesperson, representative
sportsmanship	fair play, team play, sporting attitude
statesman	official, diplomat
tradesman	shopkeeper , trader, merchant
weatherman	forecaster
working man	workers, laborer, employee

2.0 Language Bias Against Age

Ageist bias discriminates against people because of their age. They may be perceived as too young, reckless and inexperienced, or too old and feeble, senile and inflexible.

It is appropriate to use *boy* and *girl* for children of high school age and under. *Young man* and *young woman* or *male adolescent* and *female adolescent* can be appropriate, but *teenager* carries a certain bias. *Men* and *women* are preferred terms for persons 18 and older.

Many people find *senior citizen* off-putting because of its political connotations. Similarly, *the elderly* implies feebleness to some. When referring to members of this group, try to find a label that describes more specifically the population or person you have in mind: *people over sixty-five*, *retirees*, *octogenarians*. More generically, the term *older people*, although vague, implies nothing negative. Of course, avoid disparaging terms, as well as informal ones such as *old folks*, *seniors*, and *golden agers*.

Unacceptable: Dr. Frank Martinez, a senior citizen, continues to maintain a vigorous practice despite his age.

Acceptable: Dr. Frank Martinez, now seventy years old, continues to maintain a vigorous practice.

3.0 Language Biased Against People with Disabilities

In general, place people first, not their disability. Call people what they want to be called, and do not contrast one group of people with another group called "normal" people. Write "we compared people with autism to people without autism" not "we contrasted autistics to normals."

The terms *disability* and *disabled* are generally preferred over *handicap* or *crippled*. Remember that a disability is a physical quality while a handicap is a limitation that might be imposed by nonphysical factors, such as stairs or poverty or social attitudes. More "positive" labels, such as *physically challenged* and *differently abled*, may occasionally be appropriate, although many people with disabilities find such euphemisms offensive. When referring to individuals with specific disabilities, first be sure that noting the disability is necessary. If it is, refer to it in a way that does not define the person by the disability. If it is not, do not mention it at all.

Do not use pejorative terms like *stroke victim* or *stroke sufferers*. Use a more neutral terminology such as *people who have had a stroke*. Avoid the terms *challenged* and *special* unless the population referred to prefers this terminology (for example, Special Olympics). As a rule, use the phrase "people with _____"

In general, use terminology that treats a disability or an illness neutrally rather than negatively.

Unacceptable	Acceptable
cancer victim, AIDS victim	cancer patient, person with AIDS
suffers from diabetes	is diabetic
confined/bound to a wheelchair	uses a wheelchair
dying of cancer	living with cancer

Unacceptable: Debbie Stevens, a blind seventh grader at Riverview Junior High, won third prize in the county public-speaking competition.

Acceptable: Debbie Stevens, a seventh grader at Riverview Junior High, won third prize in the county public-speaking competition.

Unacceptable: Paraplegic James Alton competes in marathons with other crippled racers who train in wheelchairs.

Acceptable: James Alton, an attorney whose legs were paralyzed in an automobile accident, competes in marathons with other disabled racers who train in wheelchairs.

4.0 Language Biased Against Ethnic or Racial Groups

Clearly, ethnic and racial insults are unacceptable in professional writing. Less clear-cut, however, are the labels that are most acceptable for identifying specific ethnic and racial groups. Following are some general guidelines.

- Both **black** and **African American** are generally acceptable (although some members of this community prefer one or the other). The phrase **people of color** is sometimes used to include other racial groups, particularly for political purposes. The labels **Negro** and **colored** are generally not acceptable.
- Depending to some extent on regional preference, people with roots in Latin America refer to themselves as **Hispanic**, **Latino/Latina**, or **Chicano/Chicana**, or by place of origin (**Cuban American**, **Puerto Rican**). Except for specific audiences or individuals, **Latino** is generally acceptable.
- The preference is for **Asian** or **Asian American** rather than **Oriental**. Again, specific groups may prefer labels based on country of origin (**Japanese American**, **Korean**).
- **Native American** has gained favor over **Indian**. Depending on context, you might more accurately refer to a specific tribe or tribes.
- In Canada the official term for local native people is **Inuit** rather than **Eskimo**. Many Alaskan natives also prefer this term.
- Increasingly, people of mixed racial heritage are lobbying to be recognized as such, rather than being identified by a specific racial designation. Respect such concerns when appropriate.

Another concern is language that may suggest ethnic or racial stereotypes. Avoid unsupported generalizations about racial or ethnic groups, as well as racially based assumptions about individuals.

5.0 Language Biased Against Sexual Orientation

Biased language discriminates against people because of their sexual orientation. Such discrimination – like all discrimination – doesn't make business sense.

As with other bias, consider whether the reference to the person's sexual orientation is necessary to mention in the first place. In general, writing should be free of heterosexual bias.

The term *sexual orientation* is preferred over the term *sexual preference*. It is preferable to use the terms *lesbians* and *gay men* rather than *homosexuals*. The terms *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, and *bisexual* can be used to describe both the identity and the behavior of subjects.

Avoid using examples of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons when referring to activities (e.g., parenting, athletic ability) that are erroneously associated only with heterosexual people by many readers.

Avoid inaccurate stereotypes about lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons. Stigmatizing or pathologizing language regarding gay men, lesbians, and bisexual persons should be avoided (e.g., "sexual deviate", "sexual invert"). Take care that examples do not further stigmatize lesbians, gay men, or bisexual persons. An example such as "Psychologists need training in working with special populations such as lesbians, drug abusers, and alcoholics" is stigmatizing in that it lists a status designation (lesbians) with designations of people being treated.

When comparing a group of gay men or lesbians to others, use parallel terms. For example, contrasting lesbians with "the general public" or "normal women" portrays lesbians as marginal to society. More appropriate comparison groups might be "heterosexual women" and "heterosexual men and women."

For More Information

For a discussion on the philosophy behind avoiding sexist language, see [Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language](http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html) by Virginia L. Warren, Chapman College. American Philosophical Association Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession at <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html>

sources: [Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language](http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html) by Virginia L. Warren, Chapman College. American Philosophical Association Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession at <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html>; [Non-Sexist Language](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_nonsex.html) from Purdue University OWL http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_nonsex.html; American Psychological Association at <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/language.html>; The Mayfield Handbook of Technical & Scientific Writing at <https://mit.imoat.net/handbook/biased.htm>; [Gendered Terms and Nonsexist Language](http://www.towson.edu/~loiselle/genderedterms.html) by Dawnelle Loiselle, Towson College, at <http://www.towson.edu/~loiselle/genderedterms.html>