

Inclusive Language

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Summary: Describes inclusive language and provides three options for revising sentences to ensure the use of inclusive language.

Learning Objectives: To define inclusive language. To use inclusive language successfully to avoid sexist language and language with age, race, or gender bias. To name and use the options for revising sentences that use sexist language.

Inclusive language enables writers to avoid misrepresenting or misusing an individual's gender, race, age, and so on when writing. Consider common stereotypes, as in the sentence "The nurse helped her patient." This sentence assumes that nurses are all female—a common stereotype. When masculine and feminine roles are stereotyped, the results can be offensive. The same can be said for stereotyping based on one's age or race.

To prevent assumptions of this nature, use inclusive language to avoid or eliminate sexist language and other stereotypes. Writing should incorporate inclusive language so that the subject's gender, race, age, etc. are properly represented.

Avoiding Sexist Language

Pronouns should not "default" to either the masculine or feminine case when you don't know the gender of the person the pronoun refers to.

Incorrect Ex: A good hairstylist always puts her clients at ease.

By using the pronoun "her" in the incorrect example, the writer automatically presumes that all hairstylists are women. In the revised example, no gender is implied.

Revised Ex: Good hairstylists always put their clients at ease.

There are several options you can use to ensure that your language is inclusive. The three most common options are eliminating the pronoun, including both the masculine and feminine pronouns, and placing the preceding noun in plural form.

Option 1. Eliminate the pronoun altogether.

Incorrect Ex: An employee has expressed her concern about sexual harassment.



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Revised Ex: An employee has expressed concern about sexual harassment.

As in the first example above, the pronoun has been eliminated in order to show that a pronoun is not always necessary. An “employee” can now refer to either a man or a woman. In the incorrect example, the pronoun “her” suggests that all employees who get sexually harassed are women.

Option 2. Include both the masculine and the feminine pronouns.

Incorrect Ex: As an adolescent matures, he becomes more aware of adult issues.

Revised Ex: As an adolescent matures, he or she becomes more aware of adult issues.

By using the pronoun “he” in the incorrect example, the writer is making the assumption that all adolescents are male. The revised example includes the pronoun “she” in order to represent both genders.

Option 3. Place the preceding noun in plural form.

Incorrect Ex: A child should study if he wants to succeed academically.

Revised Ex: Children should study if they want to succeed academically.

When you use a singular noun, you must use a singular pronoun. Since the subject (child) is not given a specific gender, the pronoun “he” is misused. Therefore, one way to eliminate this misuse altogether is to change the preceding noun to a plural form. Thus, “child” becomes “children” and “he” becomes “they.” The writer also could have used “he or she” but using the plural form not only eliminates the presumption that only males are students but also has the potential to make this sentence and other sound more graceful. This option is very useful when you are making general statements about a group of people, as this sentence does.

Finally, when you are eliminating sexist language, be careful to avoid stereotyping sex roles.

Hint: One thing that underlines the need to use neutral pronouns is the need to avoid stereotypes, to look for other ways that sexist language may be present in your language.

Incorrect Ex: The common man should understand that point.

Revised Ex: The average person should understand that point.

In the incorrect example, “the common man” attempts to refer to all of humanity, but leaves women out of the picture entirely. In order to avoid stereotyping, the revised example replaces it with “the average person” since the subject “person” refers to both genders.

Avoiding Age, Race, or Gender Bias

Avoid indicating a person's age, race, or gender unless that point is relevant to the discussion.

Incorrect Ex: He's a very open-minded Hispanic in our community.



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Revised Ex: He is a very open-minded man in our community.

The fact that the subject is Hispanic is irrelevant because the discussion is about his open-mindedness. Being open-minded is not directly associated with one's race.

Avoid making reference to a person's competence as if it were unusual for a member of a certain group.

Incorrect Ex: Surprisingly, those crippled basketball players outscored the able-bodied players in the game!

Revised Ex: The basketball players who use wheelchairs scored more points than other team players.

The first sentence suggests that it's unusual that basketball players who are disabled can play well. The second sentence makes several changes. It removes the offensive term "crippled" and uses the more acceptable "use wheelchairs," which allows the focus to remain on the players. It also removes the word "able-bodied," which suggests that the players with disabilities are not able or capable. Finally, the second sentence merely states the fact of the scoring and doesn't suggest that it is surprising in any way.

When choosing to include information about a person's age, race, or gender, mention these factors for all individuals who are being discussed.

Incorrect Ex: Jon, an elderly man in his 90s; Sara; and Maria, a Hispanic female, meet regularly at the local coffee shop to play a round of cards.

Revised Ex: Jon, a retired man in his 90s; Sara, a nurse at Sacred Heart in her 30s; and Maria, a college student in her 20s, meet regularly at the local coffee shop to play a round of cards.

This second example suggests what to do if you choose to mention a subject's age or race. In the incorrect example, the information given for each person is inconsistent. The revised example includes the same kind of comparative information for each person.

Focus on the person rather than on the disability or condition of the person. Remember that the condition or disability is not what defines the whole person.

Incorrect Ex: Cancer patients need special seating accommodations during the trial.

Revised Ex: Witnesses who are being treated for cancer will need special seating arrangements during the trial.

In the revised example, the writer addresses the witnesses as individuals that are being treated for the disease rather than define them as solely as patients with a disease. Inclusive language should be used in this instance so that people suffering with a condition can be described as individuals first rather than patients.



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Keep in mind that one's sexual preference should be stated with care. Avoid labeling people as objects and focus on the person rather than on his or her sexual preference.

Incorrect Ex: The gays have many organizations around the world that help raise awareness about civil rights.

Revised Ex: There are many organizations around the world that help raise awareness about civil rights for gays and lesbians.

In the revised example, the writer refers to "lesbians and gay men" to address their identity rather than generally categorizing them as objects ("the gays"), which can be very offensive.

Inclusive Language Practice Exercises

Correct the following sentences by using the rules discussed above. You may need to use additional paper.

1. Visually-impaired people will have access to special computer monitors.
2. A doctor will need to have his insurance renewed annually.
3. She's a smart black woman.
4. While a teenager is developing, he tends to want to challenge people in positions of authority.
5. The younger black females had more support from their teachers.
6. An accountant will need to review his list of clients on a monthly basis.
7. He's an Asian-American who has an accurate understanding of American business matters.
8. Any man would want to see the real proof.
9. Employees are welcome to bring their wives to the dinner.
10. For an older man, he's pretty quick to guess the answer.
11. When an individual is first learning to drive, she needs to pay close attention to the traffic signs.
12. Even a woman would know which decision to make.
13. An attorney can express her dissatisfaction with the ruling to the court's attorney.
14. Crippled basketball players can play the game in their wheel chairs.
15. The pilot should push the emergency button when he begins to feel turbulence.
16. A child who reads every night will increase his vocabulary.
17. Hearing-impaired individuals will need to wear ear plugs.
18. A man should never become too busy to enjoy his children.
19. Diabetics need to watch their sugar intake.
20. A man should explain the facts of life to his child.
21. Anyone who works overtime will enjoy spending his paycheck.
22. He's very polite for an Asian man.
23. An ambulance driver will need to turn on his vehicle's emergency lights to drive through intersections.
24. For a German, she's pretty accepting of other cultures.
25. When a person marries, he usually takes on a significant amount of responsibility.



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