

Gender-inclusive language guidelines (English)

Promoting gender equality through the use of language

Writing in a gender-inclusive way

Given the key role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, adopting gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and fight gender bias. Gender-inclusive language, or gender-neutral language, is language that avoids bias toward a particular sex or social gender and therefore is less likely to convey gender stereotypes.

In the use of the English language, the use of masculine nouns/pronouns in a generic fashion was standard practice until the 1970s, when the women's movement challenged it. Since then, by "uncovering the gendered nature of many linguistic rules and norms"¹, feminist linguists contributed to the wider adoption of gender-neutral language to convey inclusion of all sexes or genders.

These guidelines by UN Women seek to assist in the gender-inclusive writing, review and translation of English-language documents. Similar guidelines are available also in French and Spanish to ensure gender-inclusive use of language in French and Spanish documents.

These guidelines are living documents. We look forward to receiving feedback and contributions for future editions to further enrich the collection. You can send your suggestions to: genderterm@unwomen.org.

Our Goal: A text conveying gender equality

Several strategies can be adopted to promote gender equality through language in a document, while writing in a clear and fluid way to retain the document's communicative goals:

- A) Use gender-neutral expressions
- B) Use inclusive language
- C) Use both feminine and masculine forms
 - as separate words
 - through the use of slashes

Writers should always consider the text as whole and its nature when choosing among the different strategies. Gender-inclusive writing should not affect the readability of a text.

¹ Anne Pauwels (2003). "Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism", in *The Handbook and Language of Gender*, eds. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff. Oxford. Blackwell Publishing.

A: Use gender-neutral expressions

Avoid gender-specific nouns when making generic references

Writers should avoid expressions that use the masculine form when making generic references to both men and women, i.e. using *congressmen* when referring to both female and male legislators.

Whenever possible, use a gender-neutral alternative.

Avoid	Prefer
Men, mankind	People, humanity, human beings, humankind, we, women and men
Businessmen	Representatives, business community, business people
Chairman	Chair, chairperson, head
Congressman	Legislator, congressional representative, parliamentarian
Guys (referred to men and women)	All
Man-made disaster	Human induced disaster
Policeman	Police officer
Steward, stewardess	Flight attendant
Freshman student	First-year student
Landlord, landlady	Owner
Layman, common man	layperson, average person
Boyfriends/girlfriends or husbands/wives	Partners, spouses

B: Use inclusive language

In English, the use of the generic masculine form to refer to both genders creates a gender bias. Whenever possible, writers should look at ways to modify the sentence to make it gender-neutral. Here are a few options:

a) Omitting the masculine reference word

Avoid	Prefer
Each professor should send one of his assistants to the conference.	Each professor should send one assistant to the conference.
A good employee knows that he should strive for excellence.	A good employee strives for excellence.

b) Using plural forms for both nouns and reference words

Avoid	Prefer
Each participant must present his ID badge.	All participants must present their ID badges.
A representative must listen to his supporters.	Representatives must listen to their supporters.

c) Using they/their to refer back to singular nouns (“Singular they”)

Avoid	Prefer
Each participant must present his ID badge.	Each participant must present their ID badge.

Please note this approach is more recent and not widely accepted, and it should not be adopted in formal texts.

d) Using the passive voice

Avoid	Prefer
The student must submit his assignment by Monday.	Assignments must be submitted by Monday.

Please note, the passive voice should be used in moderation throughout a document.

C: Use both feminine and masculine forms

Sometimes, the writer might want to retain both the feminine and masculine forms of the words. Below are some examples of how we could replace the masculine generic form with a gender-sensitive expression.

a) Using both feminine and masculine reference words

Writers may decide to use “he or she”, or “she or he”, when the gender of the referent is unknown or irrelevant.

Examples

Each professor should send **his or her assistant** to the conference.

It all came down to **one person’s vote**. **He or she** would decide the future of the county.

While this solution specifically includes both women and men and works well in many situations, some readers find it stylistically heavy, especially when “she or he” is repeated many times throughout the text.

b) Alternating genders and pronouns

When the gender of the referent is unknown and equally likely to be male or female, or when referring to a mixed group, it is possible to alternate masculine and feminine pronouns. Alternating “he” and “she” in the same text conveys the same sense of inclusiveness as using both pronouns, and is likely to facilitate the reading.

Example

Whoever **she** is. Wherever **he** lives. **Every child** deserves a childhood. A future. A fair chance. That’s why UNICEF is there.

c) Using slashes when writing both forms of words

Writers can resort to the use of slashes [/] and write both the feminine and the masculine forms of words, for instance: “she/he”, “his/hers” and “him/her”.

Avoid	Prefer
A political leader must work 12 hours a day and seven days a week. This places a heavy burden on him. He must cope with this or lose popularity.	A political leader must work 12 hours a day and seven days a week. This places a heavy burden on her/him . He/she must cope with this or lose popularity.

Because this strategy has a negative impact on readability, it is advisable not to overuse it. Writers may resort to it when filling in forms or addressing letterheads, or if a gender-neutral expression cannot be found.

Generally, the use of this strategy should be avoided in public information products such as web features, press releases, or narrative texts. In such cases, changing a sentence structure should be preferred (see previous section).

Additional tips for writing in a gender-sensitive way

The **UN Women gender-sensitive lexicon** should be used as a key reference. The lexicon includes 600+ terms drawn from UN and UN Women literature. It helps ensure consistent use of gender-sensitive terminology as well as to clarify possible doubts, such as the mistaken use of the verb “engender”, often mistaken for “mainstream a gender perspective”.

In addition to adopting the above-mentioned strategies, as a general rule it is recommended to use the active voice to show the empowerment of women.

Avoid using expressions that could have a negative connotation. For example, “investing” is a verb usually used in finance, for money/trading. Using “girls” to refer to grown women should be avoided, as it infantilizes and disrespects women.

Avoid	Prefer
Investing in women	Investing in women’s potential
Mastering a skill	Being competent in a skill
Pam had lunch with the girls at the office	Pam had lunch with some colleagues at the office

Special attention should be paid to the use of vocabulary referring to **gender identity and sexual orientation, roles and attributes, occupations**, as well as to the use of **titles**.

a) Gender identity and sexual orientation

Be mindful of gender and sexual orientation. When writing about a transgender person, use nouns and pronouns consistent with the individual’s gender identity, regardless of sex at birth. When possible, use the pronoun preferred by that individual.

b) Stereotyping roles/attributes

Refer to women and men without assuming stereotypical roles or attributes related to their gender.

Avoid	Prefer
John and Mary both have full-time jobs; he helps her with the housework.	John and Mary both have full-time jobs; they share the housework.
The Conference participants and their wives are invited.	The Conference participants and their spouses/partners/guests are invited.

c) Occupations

Avoid masculine generic occupational titles (i.e. fireman, mailman). See Section A on gender-neutral expressions for more examples.

With the exception of contexts where gender discrimination in occupations are highlighted and thus require the use of gender-specific forms, as a general rule you should:

- Use a gender-neutral form (especially for professions that are still male-dominated, or those that are typically female-dominated);
- Avoid the unnecessary references to gender: adding “female”, “women” or “male” to generic neutral terms should be avoided.

Avoid	Prefer
Cleaning lady	Cleaner
Male nurse	Nurse
Female doctor	Doctor
Female politician	Politician

d) Titles

Use courtesy titles that promote gender equality regardless of marital status.

Avoid	Prefer
Miss, Mrs.	Ms. (unless the woman herself prefers the courtesy title Mrs. or Miss). A woman's marital status is generally irrelevant to the matter at hand.
Mr. and Mrs. John Smith	Jane and John Smith; Ms. Jane and Mr. John Smith; Mrs. and Mr. Smith (when the woman herself prefers the courtesy title Mrs.).

Checklist for gender-related revisions

When reviewing a text, the following are some of the questions that a writer should ask herself/himself:

1. Does the text contain any gender-specific expressions that could have been replaced with gender-neutral ones? For instance, does the text use the words "man" or "men" (used as single words or in compound words) to refer to people who may not be men?
2. Does the text contain the use of masculine forms in generic references, i.e. when referring to an unspecified group of people?
3. Does the text adopt any occupational or other gender stereotypes?
4. Does the text contain unnecessary references to sex or gender?
5. Does the text include the same kinds of information when referring to people of different genders?

Key resources

- UN Women's GenderTerm should be consulted for consistency in the terminology used throughout the organization: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/gender-term>
- UN guidelines: <http://dd.dgacm.org/editorialmanual/>
- UNTerm (UN multilingual online glossary): <http://unterm.un.org/>
- Official UN and UN Women texts and declarations (including the CSW Agreed Conclusions, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the CEDAW Convention, etc.