

## **How to eliminate sexism from your writing** **by Merriellyn Kett**

The advice you'll get on avoiding sexism in your writing comes from a reformed sexist, a sexist who never even knew she was a sexist. I was always sympathetic toward the women's movement. I never thought it would destroy the American home. Faced with evidence of the sexist bias in my writing I had two back-up explanations. The first was that the reason I consistently matched prestige positions (president, chairman, leader, etc.) with masculine pronouns was because that was the way the world was. There weren't any women mayors, vice-presidents, or publishers. If the person I was talking to could name a woman mayor or if they pressed the issue and asked why I paired words like citizen, diabetic, and octogenarian with masculine pronouns even though women were a majority of the members of each of these groups, my fall back position was to say that the bias was inherent in the English language itself, not me.

If you have ever found yourself articulating these arguments, you are probably a closet sexist. If you have ever heard yourself begin a sentence with "Sure I believe in equal pay for equal work but..." you are probably a sexist. The real test, however, of whether such bias exists and has colored your editorial policy is how you operate on the job. If you find yourself answering yes to any of the questions below, you cannot dismiss out of hand suggestion that sexism is coloring your writing.

### **Are you a sexist? A checklist.**

Yes   No

1. Do you describe the women you write about in greater physical detail than the men you write about?
2. Do you refer to adult women as "girls" or "gals" or "ladies" and consistently refer to adult males as "men"?
3. Do you routinely provide information about the marital status of women you write about but not the men?
4. Do you use "lady" as a modifier, as in "lady architect," "lady welder," and "lady lawyer"?
5. Have you ever written to a woman or introduced a woman using only her husband's names (Mrs. Brian Murphy)?
6. Do you call women by their first names and men in similar positions by their last names or last names and courtesy title?
7. Do you automatically begin a letter "Dear Sir"?
8. Do you exclude women from many occupational categories by using words ending in -man (businessman, Congressman, repairman)?
9. At a cocktail party would you continue talking with someone who described himself as a male chauvinist pig but avoid a self-proclaimed feminist?
10. If an unpleasant dirty joke is told in a crowd that contains a woman, do you believe she should laugh so that the men don't feel uncomfortable?
11. Do you believe it's a compliment to say a woman thinks like a man?
12. Do you believe a woman should be flattered if men in groups comment about her appearance and sexual desirability as she walks down the street?

13. Do you believe non-sexist writing is a trivial objective?
14. Do you believe non-sexist writing is an unobtainable objective?

If you're at the point where you're interested in removing any unintentional sexist overtones from your writing, you might say something like this: "Sure I can stop first-naming women. And it's easy to stop describing them as 'pretty' and 'attractive,' but what do I do about the great pronoun problem?"

**So-called "generic" he**

In the nineteenth century in England, grammarians attempted to alter the language in a very fundamental way. They wanted to make he a common gender singular pronoun, not simply a masculine pronoun. She would be the referent for nouns exclusively feminine, like mother, and he would be the referent for all other nouns, both masculine and common gender. Now prior to the nineteenth century English had always had a linguistic device for referring to sex-indefinite referents, most importantly, the use of singular they (their, them) as in sentences like these:

1. Anyone can do it if they try hard enough.
2. Who dropped their ticket?
3. Either Mary or John should bring the schedule with them.

Not too surprisingly, sex-indefinite they continued to be preferred by confident, educated language users like Jane Austen, Shakespeare, and the whole respectable crowd everyone always mentions.

Let's analyze the first sentence more closely. The indefinite pronoun anybody is psychologically plural even though we know that it takes a singular verb in the present tense. But the sense is plural: both men and women can do it. If we insist on defining they as exclusively plural, then they fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent like anybody by one feature: number. On the other hand, he fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent like anybody by one feature also: gender. Now gender and number are grammatically analogous. Number lacks social significance; gender does not. It's because of our concern for sending clear messages that he has never caught on as a "generic" pronoun. The rejection of "generic" he is not an attempt to alter the language; it is an attempt to banish a ridiculous usage that never caught on. To help you understand this issue more clearly, consider the two charts that follow.

Actual Usage			Traditional analysis		
	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>		<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
1st person	I	we	1st person	I	we
2nd person	you	you	2nd person	you	you
3rd person	it		3rd person	he	
	he			she	
	she			it	they
	they	they			

The problem is that many of us were taught in grammar school that calling everybody he was elegant and correct. So what we need are some rules for handling this troublesome situation. There are twelve simple things you can do.

1. Pluralize.
2. Use *they, them, and their* with sex-indefinite nouns and pronouns.
3. Revise the sentence.
4. Delete the pronoun.
5. Substitute an article
6. Repeat the noun.
7. Use a synonym.
8. Compound the sentence so repeating the pronoun is unnecessary.
9. Compound pronouns (*she or he, his or hers*) or alternate examples.
10. Substitute *you (your)*.
11. Substitute *I (me, my)*.
12. Substitute *one (one's)*.

Examples of the 12 suggestions follow:

### 1. Write in the plural.

The Oppenheimer account executive is a valued associate whose pride in his firm is a mirror image of his pride in himself.

*becomes*

Oppenheimer account executives are valued associates whose pride in their firm is a mirror image of their pride in themselves.

This strategy is a simply and effective one for swiftly deleting sexist overtones from a very long document, especially if it's been written by someone else.

Pluralizing is a strategy that gracefully circumvents the vexing problem of the “generic” he in most cases. If for some reason you were forced to select three revision strategies from the list of twelve, pluralizing would certainly be one you'd opt for because of the sheer number of situations it will handle. A second advantage, and one not to be sneered at, is that it will not call attention to itself. But remember: if you start in the plural, stick to the plural.

### 2. Use *they, them, and their* with indefinite pronouns and sex-indefinite nouns and pronouns (the typical person, manager, employee, doctor, lawyer, citizen).

The average person will do what he can to help if he recognizes that an emergency exists.

*becomes*

The average person will do what they can to help if they recognize that an emergency exists.

*and*

Everyone with an interest in continuing education will want to add this book to his library.

*becomes*

Everyone with an interest in continuing education will want to add this book to their library. (Or -- to their libraries)

### 3. Revise the sentence.

The employee will not know what is expected of him unless he has had an opportunity to work through the procedure with his partner and then has repeated the procedure by himself.

*becomes*

The employee will not know what is expected after having an opportunity to work through the procedure with a partner first, and then to repeat the procedure alone.

Recasting is an essential revision technique when you're writing about a one-to-one relationship, which would be lost by pluralizing. If you are revising someone else's writing, recasting often ends up saving time. This is the third essential technique for writers who want to eliminate sexist overtones from their work.

#### **4. Delete the pronoun.**

A conservative is someone who can endure the suffering of others for the sake of his own principles.

*becomes*

A conservative is someone who can endure the suffering of others for the sake of principle.

#### **5. Substitute an article** (a, an, the) for the pronoun.

The sentence in 4

*becomes*

A conservative is someone who can endure the suffering of others for the sake of a principle.

*and*

Every manager must submit his revised budget next week.

*becomes*

Every manager must submit a revised budget next week.

The simplicity of strategies 4 and 5 makes them nice ones to have in your repertoire, but make sure you don't start the next sentence with he, referring back to conservative or manager. One positive side effect of editing for sexism is that you begin to see what a gravely over-simplified notion you have in "the typical" anything.

#### **6. Repeat the noun.**

Take your broker's suggestions seriously. He knows what the market has been doing, and he can make an educated guess about what it will do in the future.

*becomes*

Take your broker's suggestions seriously. A brokers knows...

#### **7. Use a synonym.**

The sentence in example 6

*becomes*

Take your broker's suggestions seriously. This is an individual (or professional) who knows...

**8. Compound the sentence** so repeating the pronoun or noun is unnecessary. The example above

*becomes*

Take your broker's suggestions seriously. A broker knows what the market has been doing and can make an educated guess about what it will do in the future.

**9. Compound pronouns** (*she* or *he*, *his* or *hers*) or alternate examples.

Let each workshop member participate. Did each participant have an opportunity to describe the situation in his department? Did each get a chance to share his insights?

*becomes*

Let each workshop member participate. Did Fred have an opportunity to describe the situation in his department? Did Clare get a chance to share her insights?

*or*

Let each workshop member participate. Did he or she have an opportunity to describe the personal situations and share insights?

The most important thing to remember if you alternate pronouns is to make sure that women are not included parenthetically. Parentheses or commas suggest that the inclusion of women was an afterthought or a concession, and that's certainly not the conclusion you wish your readers to draw.

**10. Substitute you (your).**

A motorist planning a car trip must make a series of decisions. He must select a route, decide upon a departure time, and determine how many hours he wishes to drive.

*becomes*

If you are a motorist planning a car trip, you must make a series of decision. You must. .

Substituting you for he leads to a more conversational tone. This solution works particularly well in directions and instructions.

**11. Substitute I (me, my).**

As a person grows older, he grows more conservative.

*becomes*

As I grow older, I become more conservative.

Substituting the first person pronoun for an indefinite pronoun also alters the tone. It becomes more personal. It is particularly appropriate when you're communicating matters of opinion, not fact.

*and*

The accounting department will not process expense account forms lacking back-up receipts.

*becomes*

I will not process. . .

Switching to the first person in the second example allows employees to identify the source of the rule about back-up receipts and gives them someone to call in case they have questions or complaints.

**12. Substitute one (one's).**

As a person matures his goals and objectives change.

*becomes*

As one matures, one's goals and objectives change.

This construction is becoming obsolete so it is not highly recommended as a revision strategy. The philosophical tone is rather charming, but it begs the question, "Says who?"

As you become familiar with these revision strategies and your syntactic fluency increases, avoiding sexist prose will become second nature. You will also find that producing non-sexist prose is quite a bit easier than revising your own writing or someone else's. Stick with it.