Gender Sensitive and Inclusive Language Guide

Language is a powerful vehicle of ideas and representations, and as such, can highlight, accentuate, or befog certain characteristics of the world [1]. In the androcentric context of our societies, language – in its use and structure – biases our perception of the world, most often to the disadvantage of women, or for that matter, any person that does not identify as being a man [2]. Different language strategies have therefore been suggested to promote more neutral forms of language, echoing the growing need for more equal treatment for all. The present *non-sexist and inclusive language* guide is therefore intended for those who wish to adopt a more inclusive and non-sexist way of communicating. Although the present guide does not exhaustively cover all issues pertaining to non-sexist language, it covers four of the most important. Before presenting these four issues, we would like to stress a principle that may guide your search for non-sexist language: when possible, and when it is not relevant, please try to avoid any explicit mention of gender. The present guide is based on existing non-sexist language guides in Switzerland, mainly framed for French and German, as well as existing ones for English (see bibliography for full references).

The masculine as generic: the specific case of *he*

Although the singular and non-gendered pronoun *they* has been used quite readily in the literature across centuries [3], it met fierce criticism by 19th century prescriptive grammarians, who decided to instead impose the sex-indefinite *he*. These androcentric grammarians saw the masculine form as the *worthier* one [3]. Other languages, such as French in the 17th century, underwent very similar changes, consequently asserting the masculine power, both in language and society [4]. In French, for example, the disappearance of certain occupational feminine forms (e.g., *une médecine* [a doctor$_{female}$]) was in fact intended as a signal to women that these occupations were only for men. The difficulty of considering the pronoun *he* as a generic form has been well documented in the scientific literature [5], and should therefore always be avoided.

Re-introducing the singular use of *they* – which only relatively recently disappear – would of course require ignoring grammatical proscription (and you may decide that this will be your case), yet it has been shown that its use is at least cognitively very easy [6]. Although the singular use of *they* is becoming increasingly popular (again), other alternatives may speak to those wishing to follow grammatical proscription yet avoid the use of *he* as generic. We now turn to concrete examples, which of course will depend on the context at hand:

Prefer the plural form to the singular one

> *Example: A student needs to consult his notes before the lecture*
>
> *Prefer: Students need to consult their notes before the lecture*

Directly address readers or listeners

> *Example: If a student wants to enrol, he needs to click here*
>
> *Prefer: If you want to enrol, click here* or *If you are a student and want to enrol, click here*

Remove the pronoun

> *Example: Each student chooses the modules he wants to follow*
>
> *Prefer: Each student chooses the modules to follow*

Use pair forms to refer to both genders, or the singular *they*

> *Example: When a researcher decides to send a manuscript, he has to carefully check for spelling mistakes*
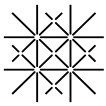
Prefer: When a researcher decides to send a manuscript, she or he has to carefully check for spelling mistakes or When a researcher decides to send a manuscript, they have to carefully check for spelling mistakes

We do recommend the order *she or/and he* for reasons explained in Section 2

Reformulate to avoid using gendered pronouns (often using the passive form)

Example: The professor who gets published frequently will have a better chance when he goes before the tenure board.

Prefer: The professor who gets published frequently will have a better chance when going before the tenure board review.

Following the same rationale as for the pronoun *he*, *man* or *men* should never be used as generics. Typically, *man* should be replaced by terms such as *person*, *people*, *individual*, *human*, or *human being*. Note that some research seems to indicate the term *human* activates similar representations to man (and different ones to woman) [7], and therefore should be used with parsimony.

Word order

Although *word order* is often shadowed by other important factors (such as those discussed above), it can act as a power catalyst for generating and maintaining androcentricity. Namely, and as discussed by recent studies [8], when mentioning two persons in a sentence, the order in which they are mentioned has some semantic, hierarchical meaning: the first person mentioned is considered to be *central* and *more important*. One could even argue that first-mentioned elements are likely to receive more attention, simply because they are read first [9]. As such, in androcentric cultures, men are commonly and predominantly mentioned first[1] in pairs (e.g., men and women, husband and wife), giving them a more central position.

Ideally, word order should be randomly assigned, distributing centrality equally to women and men. However, given the extremely high propensity to mention men first, we suggest that – for the time being – women be mentioned first. Of course, this is only to be applied in cases where it is impossible to remove explicit mention of gender – which, as suggested earlier in this guide, should always be aimed for.

Addressing persons

It has been long shown that language inevitably attracts our attention towards world characteristics that may be, in context, irrelevant [1;2]. As such, we do advise that when addressing persons, gendered terms should – as much as possible and when not relevant – be avoided, even when it is known.

Example: Dear Ms Mueller

Prefer: Dear Anne Mueller

In these cases, of course, one could argue that the first name is gendered, and one could find other ways to address this person, when applicable (e.g., *Dear Dr Mueller*). If you need, or want, to avoid first names, and no non-gendered alternatives are possible, *Ms* should be used for women, and *Mr* for men. Options specifying marital status (Miss or Mrs) should be avoided.

When addressing unknown persons, prefer formulations such as *Dear Colleague, Dear Professor*, *Dear Editor*, etc. In line with the first issue presented in this guide, please avoid all uses of the term *man* as a generic. So, for example, *a chairman* becomes *a chairperson*. Other examples are given in the Appendix.

Similarly, avoid all explicit mention of gender when using role nouns, such as *male nurse*, *female athlete* or *housewife.*

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[1] Except for "ladies and gentlemen". See [8] for a discussion on this special case.
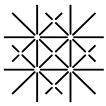
Stereotyping

We often make judgments based on simplifying strategies, rather than on extensive algorithmic processing [10;11], and these heuristics enable us to save significant cognitive resources. Unfortunately, a corollary to these simplifying strategies is that we base our judgement of others on constraining and limiting beliefs, such as gender stereotypes. As such, gender stereotypes can broadly be defined as generalized beliefs and expectations about social roles or occupations that are considered appropriate based on individuals' socially identified sex [12]. Although these stereotypes may at times be rather difficult to combat, language – and language use – can be a powerful source to do so. Therefore, we would advise an overarching principle associated with stereotyping: Never assume a specific gender to be associated with different roles or occupations. So, for example:

> *Example: Professors and their wives were invited.*
>
> *Prefer: Professors and their partners were invited*
>
> *Example: Mothers can benefit from the university's childcare service*
>
> *Prefer: Parents can benefit from the university's childcare service*

It is important to also note that some words that are often used in the media to refer to women should be avoided, as they are degrading and patronizing, hence inappropriate. For example, it is not rare to see terms that infantilize women, such as *girls* used to refer to women (e.g., *The girls from the university volleyball team won all their matches*). In fact, the word *girl(s)* (and *boy(s)*) should only be used for persons that are still in secondary school or lower. Similarly, the word *lady* should always be avoided, as it implicates lower status and patronization.

Lastly, when discussing gender (e.g., researchers writing articles about gender effects, university representatives talking to the media etc.), avoid the tendency to attribute differences to women. Indeed, social psychology research has revealed a tendency to attribute differences between complimentary social groups, that differ in power, to the lower status group. Gender differences in behavior, for example, are more often explained in terms of how women are different from men, than in terms of how men are different from women [13]. Similarly, differences by race and sexual orientation are more often attributed to features of non-White or non-heterosexual groups than to people who are White or heterosexual [13]. These explanations also have consequences as when a group is positioned as "the effect to be explained" it can make that group appear less powerful, and make existing power differences appear more legitimate. These processes occur to the extent that the higher status group is taken to be the assumed norm or default identity when generating explanations. Therefore, try to always avoid an androcentric perspective in your communications.

Final notes to the present guide

In this guide, we have offered ways to avoid sexist language, mainly by de-gendering discourse and communication. Although this is important in terms of equal visibility and treatment of women and men, we would like to stress the importance of going beyond the binary notion of gender. As such, try to consider gender as a continuum in your communications and discourse, to encompass all those that identify themselves neither with women nor with men. The American Psychology Association for reducing bias (see link below) provides detailed principles to do so. Finally, we would also like to stress that communication naturally encompasses visual communication. As such, you should also always think about your visual representations as inclusive, and as not giving visual priority to one gender over another, for example, by setting men in the front of a picture and women at a farther distance (or men in the centre and women in the periphery). In line with the recommendations of Section 4 of this guide, you should always avoid stereotypical depictions of gender (e.g., hair style, shoes etc.).

Note: This language guide was authored by Dr. Pascal Gygax (2019) and slightly adapted for the purposes of the University of Basel.

References

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Additional guides available on-line

Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language from the American Philosophical Association - https://www.apaonline.org/page/nonsexist

General Principles for Reducing Bias from the American Psychology Association - https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/general-principles

Non-Sexist Language Reloaded, University of Lancaster (RiGLS) - https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/images/athena-swan/BrochureSexistLanguage_final.pdf
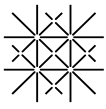
Appendix

Complement to Section 3

To	Prefer
Businessman/men	Business person/people
	People in business
	Entrepreneur
	Manager
Chairman	Chairperson
	Chair
	Moderator
	Presiding officer
Guys	People
Female/Male nurse	Nurse
Manmade	Handmade or artificial (depending on context)
Research fellow	Research Associate[2]
Spokesman	Representative
	Spokesperson
	Advocate
Sportsmanship	Fair play
	Fairness
Steward/stewardess	Flight attendant
Workmen	Workers

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[2] There is some controversy as to the use of the term "fellow". Although it literally means *a boy* or *a man*. It has been discussed as non-gendered in academia. We would still like to suggest "Research Associate" as an alternative.