AVOIDING SEXIST LANGUAGE
by Jennifer Klein '93

Writers recognize the problems with sexist language, but finding solutions is not always easy. Many times, writing in a non-sexist way seems very awkward and disrupts the flow of the paper. There has been talk about creating a new, non-gender-specific pronoun such as "tey," "e" or "E", but, on the whole, writers and readers are uncomfortable with such a drastic change. We as writers find ourselves in a delicate situation: knowing that we want to avoid using sexist language, how can we write in a non-sexist manner?

Sexist language can creep into a sentence in many different ways. Therefore, searching for a blanket solution is impractical. Often the best way to solve the problem is to **recast the entire sentence**; in other words, find a completely different way of expressing your idea. Sometimes, however, sexist language can be erased without completely changing the sentence. The best way to tackle the problem is to examine specific problems and their best solutions.

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PROBLEM #1: All subjects are male

The most easily recognizable form of sexist writing occurs in a sentence such as this:
>   *When a student writes a paper, he must proofread carefully.*

Such a sentence assumes that all students are male. To fix the sentence, we must include both genders in the category of "student." There are several ways to approach this.

An easy solution to this problem is to use "he or she" instead "he." However, this technique can be deadly if overused:
>   *When a student writes a paper, he or she should use the*
>   *spellchecker on his or her computer.*

The abbreviations "he/she" and "s/he" fall into the same category as "he or she." You can employ them, but sparingly; the same holds for the substitution of "one" for "he." Overuse of these techniques makes the writing infuriating to read.

Recommended Solution A:
To solve the problem gracefully, try <u>making the subject of the sentence plural</u>:
>   *When **students** write their papers, **the**y should use the spellcheckers*
>   *on their computers.*

The plural subject "students" now includes both genders, and the sentence retains its meaning without sounding awkward.

Recommended Solution B:
Another way to erase sexist language is to substitute a noun subject instead of a pronoun.
Example: *Ask him to define the thesis.*
Solution: *Ask **the writer** to define the thesis.*

Recommended Solution C:
The NCTE "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language" suggest substituting the first or second person for the third:
Example 1:   *When a student writes a paper, he must proofread carefully.*
Revision: *When **we** students write our papers, we must proofread carefully.*

Example 2:   *When a teacher is strict about spelling, his students will spend more
                time proofreading.*
Revision: *When **you** are strict about spelling, your students will spend more
                time proofreading.*
The change in person does not alter the meaning of either of the sentences; it merely erases the sexist language.

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PROBLEM #2: The search for a gender-neutral singular pronoun

When the subject of a sentence is a specific but unidentified individual, making the subject plural does not make sense:
                        Who dropped his ticket?
                        Somebody left his sweater.
In both of these sentences, the subject must be singular; only one person dropped the ticket and only one person left the sweater. Without resorting to using "his or her," how can we eliminate the sexism in these sentences?

Recommended Solution:
When possible, simply drop the pronoun altogether and substitute a nondescriptive article:
                        *Who dropped **a** ticket?*
                        *Somebody left **a** sweater.*
Sometimes, revising the sentence in this way changes the meaning of what you're trying to say, in which case you'll have to search for other solutions. It is, however, an "easy way out" in some cases.

Another Option:

Ann Bodine of Rutgers University suggests a device she calls the singular "they." Consider the following sentences:

*Who dropped **their** ticket?*

*Somebody left **their** sweater.*

Using "they" in this context technically is not grammatically correct; however, more and more people are starting to accept this usage as an alternative to sexist writing. You can also use this device to eliminate the use of "him or her"; consider the two sentences below:

Either Mary or John should bring a schedule with her or him.

*Either Mary or John should bring a schedule with **them**.* (Bodine 130-141)

CAUTION: Recognize that the singular "they" is <u>not</u> grammatically correct. Some texts offer it as a solution, but we recommend that you be wary of using it in formal writing, as some professors may take offense. <u>When in doubt, ask your professors what they prefer.</u>

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PROBLEM #3: Inherently sexist words

Some terms are inherently sexist, such as "mankind" and "policeman." These terms ignore the female gender in categories that should include both men and women. Often, these terms are the hardest to avoid without making the writing sound stilted. However, there are alternatives.

<u>Possible Revisions:</u>

Mykol Hamilton, Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne, among others, insist that we must find alternate terms for those that are inherently sexist. For instance, rather than using "man" or "mankind," why not use "people," "human beings," "humankind," or "humanity" (Hamilton et. al. 172)? The NCTE "Guidelines" offer many alternatives for sexist terms, such as "letter carrier" instead of "mailman" and "police officer" instead of "policeman." Some other alternatives they suggest are:

the common man	*the average person, ordinary people*
cavemen	*cave dwellers, prehistoric people*
chairman/chairwoman	*chair, presiding officer, chairperson*
businessman, businesswoman	*business executive, manager*
congressman/congresswoman	*congressional representative*
salesman/saleswoman	*sales clerk, salesperson*
fireman	*fire fighter*
stewardess	*flight attendant*
waitress/waiter	*server, food server*

In general, avoid using different words for men and women who perform the same job, and avoid using a masculine noun to encompass both; instead, use a non-gender specific title.

NOTE: When referring to quotes, you must determine whether the author meant to include both sexes. When Plato spoke about justice, for example, did he really mean justice in the hearts of humanity, or simply justice in the hearts of men? <u>When in doubt, ask your professor</u>.

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ANOTHER NOTE:

Casey Miller and Kate Swift caution us not to assign gender to gender-neutral terms. This extends beyond words such as "nurse" to phrases such as "corporate wives," which should be changed to "corporate spouses." They also call attention to personification of gender-neutral phenomena. Must ships always be female? Must time always be considered male? Miller and Swift write:

> Personifications, like other arbitrary classifications, grow out of cultural preconceptions… [Like other forms of stereotyping, they] can work to discourage fresh perceptions. Writers who use it to identify something inanimate are not tempted to rely on supposedly universal sex-linked characteristics to make their points. Instead, they must find precise words to delineate the thing itself (Miller and Swift 78-9).

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The examples in this paper easily lend themselves to the suggested revisions. When you are struggling with a real paper, solutions are usually much harder to find. If none of these suggestions lend themselves to the sentence you're working on, your best bet is to recast the entire sentence; write the sentence in a completely different way instead of trying to change bits and pieces of it. Sometimes a recast sentence not only eliminates sexist language, but also sounds clearer than your original.

Avoiding sexist language is tricky, but far from impossible. The most important thing to remember is that each problem has its own best solution. There is no quick cure; no one right answer. Consider the individual sentence or phrase. Consider its context in the work as a whole. Consider your audience; feel free to talk to your professors, for example, about the solutions they prefer. You shouldn't have to sacrifice grace for gender-neutrality. The more practice you have in eliminating sexist language, the easier you'll find it.

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