

Using Gender-Neutral Language in Academic Writing

Many people in our community identify outside the sex and gender binary of male/female and man/woman. Many trans, intersex, and genderqueer folks¹ are not comfortable being addressed with the traditional masculine and feminine pronouns “he” and “she.” Gender-neutral or non-sexed language includes pronouns that do not indicate one's gender, allowing us to address people without making gender assumptions, and allowing a safer, more inclusive learning environment. By using non-sexed language we can avoid assuming people's genders and respect the identity of our trans, intersex, and genderqueer community members. Gender-neutral language can be used in any writing where the gender of a person is unknown or unimportant.

Options for Gender-Neutral Language

1. Singular “They”

A common approach to avoiding gender specific language is the use of singular “they.” However, this technique is more commonly used in vernacular English than in written English. Because singular “they” does not prescribe to the rule of number agreement between pronouns and their antecedents, it is not accepted in Standard English and poses the possibility of confusing readers, which can distract from the message that the writer is trying to present. Despite this concern, many people find this technique to be more simple than learning a different pronominal system.

Example using non-sexist language:

An RA is responsible for establishing a safe, welcoming living environment for his or her residents.

Example using gender-neutral singular “they”:

An RA is responsible for establishing a safe, welcoming living environment for their residents.

In the above examples, while non-sexist language works solely within the gender binary of male/female, the usage of singular “they” acknowledges those who identify entirely outside of this dichotomy or somewhere along the gender spectrum. However, while the non-sexist sentence is considered grammatically correct, the sentence using gender-neutral language is not.

2. Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Another technique to avoid gender-specific language is the use of gender-neutral pronouns, also called genderqueer pronouns. These pronouns have been established within trans, genderqueer, and intersex communities. While they are not widely used in mainstream English, gender-neutral pronouns are well known and accepted within these communities. Many gender-neutral pronouns have been created. While there is no consensus on a standard of gender-neutral pronouns, “ze” is the most common subject pronoun, and “hir” and “zir” are the most commonly used pronouns for objective and possessive cases.

¹ Transgender – a person who does not identify with the sex that they were assigned at birth. Used as an umbrella term for transsexuals.

Intersex – people who are born with both male and female reproductive organs and genitals.

Genderqueer – a term used to describe someone who defines their own gender identity, or whose identity is located outside of normative binary sex/gender categories.

(term definitions taken from the “trans what?!” zine)

Examples of common gender-neutral pronouns:

Ze (subject):

Ze got accepted into college!

Hir or zir (object):

We invited hir to join us for supper.

We invited zir to join us for supper.

Hir or zir (possessive):

I went to hir house yesterday, but ze wasn't home.

I went to zir house yesterday, but ze wasn't home.

Hirself or zirself (reflexive):

Ze read zirself to sleep.

Ze read hirself to sleep.

Note: There is no difference between zir and hir besides usage preference.

Example using non-sexist language:

It is my belief that a person must have his or her basic needs met before he or she can put energy into environmental issues.

Example using gender-neutral pronouns:

It is my belief that a person must have zir basic needs met before ze can put energy into environmental issues.

3. Rewriting Sentences to be Both Grammatically Correct and Gender-Neutral

Group words to use a plural pronoun properly:

It is my belief that people must have their basic needs met before they can put energy into environmental issues.

Use the passive verb form:

It is my belief that a person's basic needs must be met before energy is put into environmental issues.

Use "one" instead of "he or she":

It is my belief that one must have one's basic needs met before putting energy into environmental issues.

Further Reading

Dumond, Val. *The Elements of Nonsexist Language*. New York, NY: Prentice Hall Press, 1990. Print.

Ehrlich, Susan, and Ruth King. "Feminist Meanings and the (De)Politicization of the Lexicon."

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"Gender-Neutral Pronouns." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Feb. 2011. Web. 22 March 2011.

Penfield, Joyce. *Women and Language in Transition*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987. Print.

Wayne, Linda D. "Neutral Pronouns: A Modest Proposal Whose Time Has Come." *Canadian Woman Studies* 24.2/3 (2005): 85-91. Print.

Tips for Promoting and Using Gender-Neutral Language

Tips for Students

The concept of gender-neutral language is fairly new and has become popular only in certain fields of academia. There are many within our community, students, staff, and faculty included, who are unfamiliar with this language. Using this gender-neutral language in academic papers can be difficult when professors are not knowledgeable about the usage and purpose of it. Here are some tips provided by professors on how to use gender-neutral language in your academic papers.

- When using gender-neutral language in your academic papers, use footnotes to explain this language and encourage a dialogue with your professor.
- Be consistent! If you start using gender-neutral language, do it throughout your entire paper. Make sure you aren't using 20 different gender-neutral pronouns in your paper.
- Provide literature about gender-neutral language to your professor.
- Realize that professors are people with their own beliefs and backgrounds. Try not to be dogmatic when talking to professors about gender-neutral language.

Tips for Staff and Faculty

Among the trans and genderqueer students I interviewed, there was a unanimous agreement that not using gender-neutral language in academic writing is not an option. As one student said, "If I don't use [genderqueer] language, I write myself out of the narrative." For these students, the issue of preferred language usage in spoken and written form is not simply one of grammatical correctness but one of identity. Here are tips for professors who want to learn more about their trans, genderqueer, and intersex students and begin a dialogue about the academic issues they face.

- Attend trans workshops facilitated by the EMPOWER and RISE Crews.
- Attend events such as Trans Awareness Week that celebrate and provide information about trans and genderqueer people.
- Check out books and zines from the RISE, EMPOWER and school libraries about trans, genderqueer and intersex people and the issues they face.
- Create a space in your classroom for students to name their identities.
For example, instead of doing a roll call the first day of class, which often doesn't include students' preferred names, pass an attendance sheet around in which students can write their preferred names and gender pronouns.
- Respect students' identities by using their preferred names and gender pronouns.
- Students' gender identities may change over time. Be open to changes in their preferred gender pronouns.
- You may slip up and use the wrong gender pronoun. That is okay. However, don't pretend you didn't use the incorrect pronoun. Correct yourself and continue your conversation. Students will appreciate your effort.
- If you receive a paper in which a student is using singular "they" or other gender-neutral language, don't just mark their paper; talk to the student or write a comment or question in the margin of their paper.
- Start dialogues with your students who are openly trans and genderqueer (don't make assumptions).