Clearing the air

Some thoughts on gender-neutral writing

A technical writer friend described a disagreement he'd had with his editor over gender-specific pronouns. In describing the use of the cockpit equipment in a fighter plane, the writer had used *he* to refer to the pilot—not because he favors generic *he,* but because the choice seemed natural. After all, he said, "there are no women fighter pilots, not even in Israel." But later, he told me, his editor had changed every *he* to a *he or she.* The writer's reaction: "I turned the air blue."

I sighed, but I sympathized with both of them because I face the same issues frequently in my work with drafting statutes. I believe my friend is a person of good will, and he says he accepts the arguments for gender-free, or gender-fair, writing. I don't know my friend's editor, but I know the editorial predicament. The editor is someone who knows that a writer's *he* can easily be read as a deliberate exclusion, who has heard plenty about the issue of sexism in writing, and who wants to avoid giving offense, for the sake of the company or the publication. The editor is also pressed for time and careful enough of the writer's ego to hesitate to do wholesale rewriting. To a person in this situation, *he or she,* even when used repeatedly, might seem like a harmless solution.

To my friend, it was anything but harmless. His editor's changes seemed to accuse him of sexism; they implied that he had forgotten or ignored women's role in his subject when in fact he had considered it carefully. At the same time, the changes seemed to him to introduce awkwardness and inaccuracy—awkwardness because they produced more repetition than English sentences can comfortably handle, and inaccuracy because a female fighter pilot is a being who doesn't yet exist.

This disagreement is a good example of the challenges we face when we try for gender-neutral writing. Unquestionably, it can make us angry. On the small scale of daily work, it can be a grind to try to reshape one's usual feel for pronouns.

In technical writing especially, feelings about gender-neutral writing run high because, even now, few women enter technical fields and the ones who do sometimes feel embattled. The men feel embattled, too; it's not pleasant to be accused of sexism. But disagreements about pronouns happen for other reasons as well, reasons apart from the issue of sex discrimination. The purpose of this article is to explore the reasons for the irritation we sometimes feel about gender-neutral writing and to suggest ways to avoid it.

Practical writing and pronoun fatigue

In humanistic writing, depicting women and men as equals is a many-faceted problem, even an interesting one (*1*). It can be a test of one's ear, a challenge to one's sense of metaphor: Which word for "people in general" should I use here? Am I being offensive if I call someone an Amazon? But in "practical" writing the writer is rarely called on to talk about humanity. Questions about the correct use of sex-linked images and metaphors do not arise for someone writing a regulation, a user's manual, or a product insert. Rather, the practical writer's focus is on do's and don'ts—on equipment and the equipment operator, or on the rights and obligations of each member of a certain class. The goal is usually to describe, or prescribe, the actions of one person following a procedure or interacting with an apparatus. In this context, the only questions are about pronouns. Do I use *he, she, he or she,* or do I look for another solution? The questions are a distraction from the writer's subject and they arise repeatedly, monotonously.

The solution to a monotonous problem lies, in part, in avoiding a single, monotonous solution.

The solution to a monotonous problem lies, in part, in avoiding a single, monotonous solution. Editors who are anxious to promote gender-neutral writing assure us that any problem can be handled with the right attitude and a few simple rules. In fact, any prepackaged answer to the pronoun problem will have its own problems, especially in technical or legal writing.

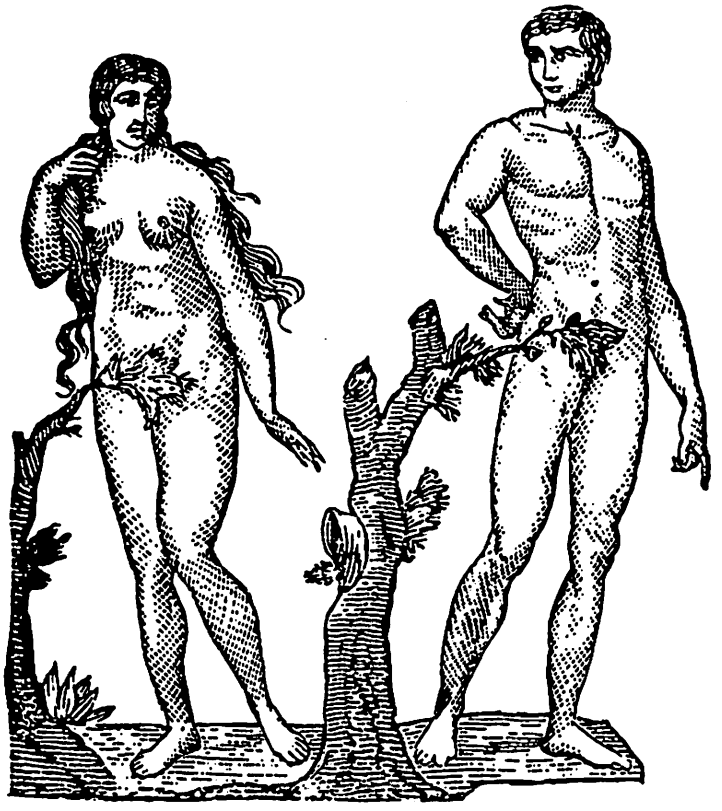
Sometimes the question "What pronoun should I use?" has a simple answer: Don't use any third-person singular pronouns. Use the imperative; that is, use commands or directions: "Simmer 5 minutes over low heat" or "Insert tab A into slot B." Or use *you:* "You agree not to keep pets in the apartment unless you have my written permission." Or use the plural: "Users of model d38 should turn to chapter 12." Or repeat the noun.

These are familiar solutions by now, and valuable ones. Those of us who do legal writing owe a debt of gratitude to technical writers for devising these solutions. It is a boon to writers as well as readers that *you* and the imperative can be used now in types of writing where they would have been unacceptable 15 years ago: consumer contracts, insurance policies, and some administrative regulations (*2*). But, valuable as they are, these familiar solutions are not appropriate in every case.

For example, if I am describing a problem with a piece of equipment, the mode of discourse I want to use is description, not directions. Consider the following

WELL SAID!

Maryann Z. Corbett



problem report about some in-house indexing software:

"The online instructions for routine 5 (combining index working documents) are unclear. The prompt 'Enter new COMBINED document id' doesn't tell the indexer that she must create a completely new, empty document."

The people in this sentence and the balance of this report—the indexers—need to be discussed in the third person, not addressed in the second. They, and their reactions to the software, are the subject of the piece, not its audience. In such a situation, using the third person—nouns supplemented by *he, she, it,* and *they*—is still the only acceptable choice.

The plural isn't always a solution either. Most commonly, the plural fails to satisfy when the writer's focus is on a single person, not a class of persons. For example, there is only one commissioner of agriculture in a state at any one time, so it feels unnatural to draft a law that assigns a duty to "them." And in cases where the plural does sound natural, it must be used with care to avoid legal problems. Suppose a drafter writes "A person convicted of a crime under sections 609.33 to 609.35 is eligible for supervised release if he . . ." An editor bent on avoiding *he* might change this to read "Persons convicted of crimes . . . are eligible . . . if they . . ." But this creates an ambiguity: does the eligibility apply only to those convicted of multiple offenses? This sort of ambiguity can be cured if the editor is alert to it, but the usual advice in legal drafting manuals is to draft in the singular, always.

So, despite the standard solutions, we still have a problem: Sometimes, what we really want to do is refer, over and over again, to an individual in action. To do that, we can use the noun over and over, or we can use pronouns. Because either a noun or a pronoun repeated too often can sound unnatural, we need a variety of techniques to help us reduce the number of instances of the noun or pronoun chosen. The drafters in my office used every technique available in English to make Minnesota statutes gender-neutral. Here are a few of them:

- First, many instances of *his* can be removed or replaced with *a, an,* or *the.*
- Sometimes *his* can be avoided by changing a nominal to a verbal expression:

  A person who imports or (has in his possession) possesses untaxed intoxicating liquor is guilty of a misdemeanor.
- If . . . then *he* clauses can often be changed to *who* (or *which* or *that*) clauses:

  (If) An applicant who has been licensed in another state (he) shall submit verification of licensure and the required fee.
- *When* clauses can be changed to *on* or *upon* phrases, or modifiers without expressed subjects:

  (If the commissioner finds) Upon finding that the sampling frequency can be safely reduced, (he) the commissioner may order it reduced as specified in clause (2).
- Changing *himself* is tricky because *himself or herself* is more obtrusive than *he or she.* One solution is to omit or replace the reflexive pronoun rather than substituting *himself or herself.*

All these methods are useful for cutting down the number of nouns and pronouns, but all have their limitations. And some methods are positively dangerous.

The dangers of pronoun-dodging

One standard solution, the passive voice, is tempting for technical and scientific editors. Technical writing has, after all, a much higher tolerance for the passive than do most other kinds of writing. But a writer runs two big risks in making active sentences passive in order to avoid pronouns. The first is the risk that the sentences will be squeezed into an unnatural shape, so that the emphasis falls in the wrong place and misleads the reader. As George Gopen and Joseph Williams have pointed out, "readers tend to expect that the material the writer intends to emphasize will appear at the end of the sentence" (3). They also point out that "readers expect a unit of discourse to be about whoever shows up first." If a sentence is composed in the active voice, and an editor makes it passive, chances are the reader will get a slightly

different sense of what the sentence is about and what the writer wanted to emphasize. (The same holds, of course, for the sentence changed from passive to active by an editor with more training in writing than in technical fields.)

The second risk of the passive is the legal risk that the sentence will say what should be done without explaining who is supposed to do it. If "all improvements of the patented invention which are made hereafter shall be promptly disclosed," we have no idea who must disclose them, or to whom (*4*).

We need to avoid the feeling that we must run from every pronoun.

Trying to do without pronouns is tricky. And we need to avoid the feeling that we must run from every pronoun. Unless we shake that feeling, we will start writing sentences like "Failure to file an objection shall be deemed an assent," sentences from which the people have disappeared. In the end we have to decide about pronouns: masculine or feminine, or both?

He: What does it mean?

We are in the middle of a linguistic change that is a big part of our pronoun problem. The word *he* actually means different things to different speakers.

The English pronoun system has undergone this kind of change before. Early in the history of English, *his* could mean "of it" as well as "of him" (*5*). But in the late Middle English period, the meaning began to change. With the development of the possessive case rule for most nouns (the rule that says "add an s-sound to a word to make it possessive") people began to take the pronoun *it* and add -s to it, producing *its*. There were then two words that could mean "of it" and a deep disagreement over the meaning of *his*. Did it mean "of it" and "of him" or only "of him"? Writers nervous about the choice of *his* or *its* avoided both words and used *thereof*, and so we see phrases like "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" in early English translations of the Bible.

Our tension suggests that a real meaning change is going on. We are doing exactly as our forebears did, and as speakers have often done when a rule of the language is changing: We are avoiding *he* because we know we do not agree about what it means. Now, as in the 16th century, there are three camps of pronoun users in English, two in opposition and a third shifting between them.

In one group are the people who sincerely believe that *he* includes both sexes if used in a context where sex is not relevant. For them, *he* is not sexist when they write it; it depicts a person of unspecified gender, or even a genderless entity like a corporation. These writers find it very hard to believe that anyone really reads generic *he* as exclusive. They find the phrase *he or she* needless and intrusive because it introduces the idea of an actor's sex where it doesn't belong. Reed Dickerson, the country's foremost authority on legal drafting, makes a complaint that is typical of this group: "The sexism, if any [in generic *he*] consists of residual overtones of maleness significant mainly to persons hypersensitized by a preoccupation with feminist concerns" (*6*).

In the second group are the people for whom *he* is truly exclusive; it means male persons only. Some people in this group resent the language they see as exclusive; others gloss over *he* without notice because it agrees with their mental image. The members of this group doubt that anyone really reads the generic *he* as inclusive. They have produced a significant body of research in support of the thesis that readers do not understand *he* as a true generic, but none that takes seriously the users of generic *he* (*7*). This difference is the second major source of our anger over gender-neutral writing. Each group disbelieves the other's statements about what *he* means and accuses the other of ill will.

In the third group are the readers who can genuinely shift between meanings of *he*. They may be able to understand *he* as inclusive or not, as needed. They may not recognize their own shifts. Most importantly, though, they recognize that other people will read *he* in different ways. That recognition is important in preserving the peace about gender-neutral writing. Writers and editors will benefit from seeing their problems as rooted in linguistic change and not in politics or stubbornness.

Working with our differences

In a linguistically divided world, is there any advice that will hold for all writers and editors of technical material, no matter how they read *he*? I think so, and I will offer some. My advice, though, can only make sense to readers who accept my arguments about the changing meaning of *he* and who will grant that speakers of English can understand *he* in different ways.

First, writers and editors must be conscious of the mental images they form. A writer who can use *he* as a true generic may be able to write *he* while holding in mind the image of a woman, or no image at all. But such a writer must remember that some readers will form a different mental image: to those readers, *he* can only

depict a man. Similarly, a writer who uses *he* exclusively must remember that some readers will see it as generic, the kind of *he* that is supposed to refer to both sexes. (In other words, a writer can deliberately choose *he* to talk about a situation that applies to men only, yet end up being scolded because readers believe the *he* means *he or she* and should have been written so.)

Both writers and editors need to remember that the mental image called up by *he* depends on the reader's understanding—unless the writer takes extra steps to control that mental image. To do so, a writer can try the technique of forewarning readers about the mental image they are expected to make. A very short sentence like "Assume for the moment a male technician" will do. Many good examples of this technique appear in Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (8). This type of forewarning puts readers on notice that the writer's choice of pronoun is considered and not thoughtless. Some writers may feel that the notice is unnecessary when the mental image is of a woman, but in a female-dominated technical field, such as nursing, it can be useful to remind the reader that the person in an example could have been male. The reminder should be brief and understated.

Both writers and editors need to create a consistent image. Although some editors advise writers to alternate male and female examples in order to write gender-neutrally, no one seriously advocates alternating pronouns within the frame of a single example. Alternation of that type is either funny or incomprehensible, like the following hypothetical version of state extradition law:

"A person arrested under an extradition warrant must not be delivered over to the agent whom the executive authority demanding him has appointed to receive her until he has been taken before a judge, who must inform her of the demand made for his surrender and of the crime with which she is charged."

Clearly, the person in an example can only have one sex at a time. If the writer is truly asking a reader to focus on one individual, that individual must be male or female. Therefore, editors should beware of reading every *he* as a deliberate exclusion of women. It is not wrong for a writer to use *he* to direct a reader to call up the mental image of a man.

It is insensitive, though, to refuse to acknowledge the presence of women or to refuse to envision them in jobs they do not commonly hold. Therefore, both writers and editors need to expand their mental images. Both should be willing to use *she*. This is easier now than it used to be; feminine pronouns are now appearing in all sorts of practical writing. A blister pack of diaper pins carries the warning: "To protect your baby when diapering, always place your fingers between her and the diaper." A text on legal writing notes that "[w]hen . . . a lawyer acts as the editor of another lawyer's writing, she must summon a variety of skills. . . ." (9). I have never seen a serious argument that this usage denies the existence of male babies or male lawyers.

Both writers and editors need to avoid mechanical solutions. In general, this means reserving *he or she* for times when we want the reader to call up two separate mental images. This might happen, for example, when there is a real sex difference to acknowledge, some evidence that men and women will really use a piece of equipment in different ways. At all costs, writers and editors need to avoid plugging in a uniform pronoun substitute throughout a passage without paying attention to sentence position and context.

It should be some consolation to know that writers before us have survived linguistic disagreements. As long as we acknowledge that no technique is a panacea, and that there are real differences among speakers of English regarding *he*, we can produce good practical writing that is gender-neutral. No one will have to alienate a portion of the intended audience, or write badly, in the name of gender equity. And no one will feel like turning the air blue.

References

(1) For a complete and current look at the range of these problems, and useful solutions, see Maggio, R. *The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage*; Oryx Press: Phoenix, 1987.
(2) For examples, see *Drafting Documents in Plain Language;* Practicing Law Institute Course Handbook Series Number 254, Practicing Law Institute: New York, 1981.
(3) Gopen, G.; Williams, J. *U. of Chicago Law Rev.* **1987**, 54.
(4) Wydick, R. *Plain English for Lawyers*; 2nd ed. Carolina Academic Press: Durham, N.C., 1985, p. 28.
(5) The evidence for this meaning is collected in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry for *his.*
(6) Dickerson, R. *Fundamentals of Legal Drafting*; 2nd ed. Little, Brown: Boston, p. 229.
(7) Thorne, B. et al. *Language, Gender, and Society: Annotated Bibliography*; Newbury House: New York, 1988; p. 166.
(8) Spock, B. *Baby and Child Care*; Simon & Schuster: New York, 1977.
(9) Weisberg, R. H. *When Lawyers Write*; Little, Brown: Boston, 1987.

Maryann Z. Corbett is Assistant for Writing Standards in the Office of the Revisor of Statutes, a service office of the Minnesota Legislature (100 Constitution Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55155; 612-297-2952). She is responsible for helping legislative drafters write law clearly and simply. She is a former teacher of composition, holds a doctorate in English from the University of Minnesota, and has a special interest in the history and structure of the English language.