

Guiding strategies

When writing inclusively from a gender equality perspective, it is important to take into account the communicative goal of the text and the type of text, its context and audience. That will determine which solutions best support its purpose and which strategy to use. These guidelines contain references to techniques to make language more inclusive. Combining them will help to produce readable, fluid and clear text.

Two strategies are generally used to make language gender-inclusive:

- **Making gender invisible by using gender-neutral language.** In most cases, gender is irrelevant to the communicative goal, and, in fact, distracts from the purpose of the text. Gender-neutral language makes no mention of gender, gender identity, sex or sexual orientation. In English, the use of gender-neutral language is the preferred strategy, because neutrality includes all human beings without making unnecessary distinctions.
- **Making gender visible by using gendered language.** This strategy can be useful in the context of promoting gender equality, which requires the use of language that represents men and women equally. The use of gendered language helps to re-establish a balance between an over-represented group (for instance, men) and one (or more) unrepresented groups (in this case, women). For example, in the case of a text discussing disparities, marginalization, inclusion or exclusion, specifying the gender is relevant as it highlights that different groups may be affected by or experience a situation differently.

In addition, gender-inclusive language avoids stereotypes and expressions that reinforce stereotypes. Language can perpetuate the stereotypical representation of one or more groups, associating it or them with specific traits, abilities, skills or behaviors.

A. Gender-neutral language

In the majority of contexts, the gender aspect is irrelevant to the substance of what is being communicated. Where that is the case, the techniques listed below can be used.

The **generic masculine** (masculine as default) can be, and often is, perceived as biased language. The generic masculine consists in using masculine-specific nouns and pronouns when the noun or pronoun stands specifically either for a female person or for a person or group of indeterminate gender. The use of the generic masculine gives the impression that women are not represented in certain groups or do not possess certain skills. Representation is important for inclusive communication. In general, when sex or gender is not set, avoid defaulting to one sex with generic masculine nouns or pronouns.

Part I – Gender-neutral terms

1. Replace generic masculine nouns with gender-neutral nouns

Prefer

This organization supports the rights of all **humankind (humanity)**.

The **chairperson/chair** gave the floor to the delegate.

Avoid

This organization supports the rights of all **mankind**.

The **chairman** gave the floor to the delegate.

See Annexes I and III for additional examples.

2. Replace generic masculine pronouns with gender-neutral nouns

Prefer

Tell the **student/writer/applicant** to include a postal address.

Avoid

Tell **him** to include a postal address.

3. Replace the third person with the second person

This can be useful when seeking to draw the reader into the text.

Prefer

When sending **your** application, **you** should include a postal address.

Avoid

When **a student** sends **his** application, **he** should include a postal address.

Part II – Gender-neutral structures

1. Replace the generic masculine with plural forms

Prefer

Students of the DL-101 course wishing/who wish to register for more advanced courses should send an email to the admissions office.

If **students** of the DL-101 course wish to register for more advanced courses, **they** should send an email to the admissions office.

Help your children to do it **themselves**.

Somebody forgot **their** phone in the conference hall.

Avoid

If **a student** of the DL-101 course wishes to register for more advanced courses, **he** should send an email to the admissions office.

Help your child to do it **himself**.

Somebody forgot **his** phone in the conference hall.

The use of plural pronouns to refer to nouns in the singular (as in the last example), while strictly speaking grammatically incorrect, is gaining acceptance as a means of avoiding unnecessary reference to gender.

2. Use passive forms to replace the generic masculine

Prefer

Students' applications should **be accompanied** by a postal address.

Avoid

When **a student** sends **his** application, **he** should include a postal address.

3. Replace the generic masculine or feminine pronoun with neutral expressions, or reformulate the sentence

Prefer

Each assistant must learn to use the software when **time permits**.

Students should include a postal address when sending (their) applications.

Applications should include a postal address.

A rights holder **who** wishes to challenge a ruling may do so within three months.

A doctor in rural areas earns less than **one** in the capital.

Avoid

Each assistant must learn to use the software when **he** can.

When **a student** sends **her** application, **she** should include a postal address.

If a rights holder wishes to challenge a ruling, **he** may do so within three months.

A doctor in rural areas earns less than **she** would in the capital.

B. Gendered language

In some contexts, making gender visible is part of the communicative goal. This technique is effective when popular beliefs or preconceptions may obscure the presence or action of either gender. Representation helps redress imbalances so that groups that have enjoyed little or no visibility are included. This technique is important, especially when the communicative goal is to support gender equality and the reduction of disparities.

Although gender-neutral language is generally preferable, in some instances, gendered language better serves the communicative purpose of the text. The efforts of WIPO to showcase women inventors or gender parity in management positions are examples of such cases.

Pairing is the main technique used. It involves juxtaposing two nouns or pronouns to represent more than one gender. When pairing nouns, alphabetical order (“female and male” or “men and women”) is generally preferable.

1. Pairing

Replace generic masculine pronouns with paired pronouns

Prefer

This job requires the recruitment of an IP expert. **He or she** must have a Master’s degree in IP.

Two seats will be reserved for the Delegate and **her or his** assistant.

Avoid

This job requires the recruitment of an IP expert. **He** must have a Master’s degree in IP.

Two seats will be reserved for the Delegate and **his** assistant.

Pairing can, however, hamper readability, especially if frequently repeated. It should therefore be used in conjunction with other solutions.

2. Forms of address

There should be consistency in the way women and men are referred to: “Mr.” for men should be matched with “Ms.” for women (rather than “Miss” or “Mrs.”) since the marital status of a woman is irrelevant in most contexts. Moreover, if a person of one gender in a group is referred to by her or his name, last name, courtesy title or profession, the other one(s) should be as well.

When referring to or addressing specific individuals, forms of address and pronouns that are consistent with their gender identity should be used.

C. Avoiding stereotypes

Professions and skills

Professions and skills have no gender: men and women can exercise whichever profession, occupy any social role and possess any type of skill, as global data show. It is therefore important to use neutral terms so as not to stereotype professions or skills. For example, professions like nurse, doctor, Prime Minister and adviser are gender neutral in English.

On occasion, however, the goal of overcoming stereotypes may be better served by explicitly indicating that some professions can be exercised by an otherwise under-represented group or that certain skills or abilities are not necessarily the preserve of the groups traditionally associated with them. In such cases, pairing a neutral noun to a gendered adjective may in fact help to reverse traditional perceptions about which gender is “usually” associated with a given profession or activity. For instance:

*Although the number of **male nurses** has increased in recent years, they still represent only 12 per cent of the nursing profession.*

*We are proud to lead the way in the recruitment of **woman doctors** in male-dominated specialties.*

See Annex I for additional examples.

Box: Sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression

Heteronormativity is the belief that there are two genders, male and female, that the biological sex of one person coincides with their sexual orientation and that the default sexual orientation is heterosexuality. Such bias can result in the stigmatization and marginalization of the forms of sexual orientation and gender identity that are perceived to be outside the binary heteronormative options.

When dealing with sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, the same strategies (“make it visible” and “make it invisible”) listed above should be used. When the sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression are not relevant to the communicative goal – which is generally the case – they should not be highlighted. When, on the other hand, the text aims to redress representation imbalances, fight stereotypes or promote inclusion, appropriate terms relating to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression should be used instead.

A glossary is available in Annex II.

When fighting discrimination and marginalization linked to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, the technique generally used is:

Replace heteronormative terms and expressions with gender-neutral words

Prefer

Guests are cordially invited to attend with their **partners**.

Avoid

Guests are cordially invited to attend with their **wives**.

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