

NCTE Guideline

A guideline found to be consistent with NCTE positions on education issues

Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language

Revised 2002, Women in Literacy and Life Assembly (WILLA); Formerly "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications"; Revised 1985; Created 1975, Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession

Language plays a central role in the way human beings behave and think. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is concerned about the critical role language plays in promoting fair treatment of women and girls, men and boys. Through careful selection of gender-fair language, NCTE members have the opportunity to influence thought and behavior both directly and indirectly. These guidelines offer suggestions for language use that will open rather than close possibilities and that speakers and writers should consider when engaged in communication activities that include:

- writing papers and publications
- preparing handouts and materials
- designing and delivering oral presentations
- speaking with students, parents, and community members
- working with students
- developing curriculum selecting texts and media
- exploring language use in classrooms serving on local, regional, and national committees

Gender-Fair Language

The language that educators use provides an important model for students and the larger community. Word choices often reflect unconscious assumptions about gender roles. As professionals, we all need to examine our language to reduce or eliminate choices that silence, stereotype, or constrain others.

The following examples provide inclusionary alternatives to specific exclusionary wording. Many are matters of vocabulary; others are matters of usage. What follows details choices and recommendations that address the following issues of gender-fair language use:

1. The pseudo-generic *he*
2. The pseudo-generic *man*
3. Titles, labels, and names
4. Gender stereotypes
5. Textual citation
6. Implications of the guidelines
7. Implementation of the guidelines

The Pseudo-Generic *He* and *His*: Creating Gender Balance

(a) The use of *he* or *his* when referring to both a female and a male excludes the female. To be inclusive, writers and presenters must use both *he* and *she*, and they must consciously balance pronoun use by sometimes reversing their order.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**
 - If a student studies hard, he will succeed.
- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**
 - If a student studies hard, he or she will succeed.
 - If a student studies hard, she or he will succeed.
 - Students who study hard will succeed.

Note: The constructions *s/he* and *he/she* provide writers with additional gender-free alternatives.

(b) Sometimes it is possible to drop the possessive form *his* altogether or to substitute an article.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- The average student is worried about his grades.
- When the student hands in his paper, grade it immediately.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- The average student is worried about grades.
- When the student hands in the paper, grade it immediately.

(c) Often, it makes sense to use the plural instead of the singular.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- Give the student his grade right away.
- Ask the student to turn in his work as soon as he is finished.
- Each student will do better if he has a voice in the decision.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- Give the students their grades right away.
- Ask students to hand in their work as soon as they are finished.
- Students will do better if they have a voice in the decision.

(d) The first- or second-person pronoun can sometimes be substituted for the third person.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- As a teacher, he faces excessive paperwork daily.
- When a teacher asks a question, he seeks student response.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- As teachers, we face excessive paperwork daily.
- When you ask your students a question, you are asking for student response.

(e) In some situations, the form *one/one's* can be substituted for *he/his*, but this construction should be used sparingly to avoid changing the tone of the writing.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- He might wonder what his response should be.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- One might wonder what one's response should be.

(f) A sentence with *he* or *his* can sometimes be recast in the passive voice. Although the passive voice has been much maligned, it has a valid function if not overused.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- Each student should hand in his paper promptly.
- The average citizen pays his taxes promptly.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- Papers should be handed in promptly.
- Taxes are paid promptly by the average citizen.

Note: Gender-conscious language users object to the passive voice when its use allows the performer of an action to escape responsibility for that action, i.e., She was assaulted.

(g) A sentence with *he* or *his* can be recast by substituting a participial phrase for a clause.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- Listen to the two-year-old as he uses his short, simple sentences to communicate.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- Listen to the two-year-old using short, simple sentences to communicate.

(h) When the subject is an indefinite pronoun, a number of options exist.

1. Recast the sentence to avoid using the indefinite pronoun.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

1. When everyone contributes his own ideas, the discussion will be a success.
2. Does everybody have his book?

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

1. When all the students contribute their own ideas, the discussion will be a success.
2. Do all of you have your books?

2. Use both pronouns (*he* or *she*; *her* or *his*).

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

1. When everyone contributes his own ideas, the discussion will be a success.
2. Does everybody have his book?
3. Each student will do better if he has a voice in the discussion.

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

1. When everyone contributes her or his own ideas, the discussion will be a success.
2. Does everybody have his or her book?
3. Each student will do better if she or he has a voice in the discussion.

3. Use the plural pronoun when the indefinite referent is clearly understood to be plural.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

1. When everyone contributes his own ideas, the discussion will be a success.
2. Does everybody have his book?

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

1. When everyone contributes their own ideas, the discussion will be a success.
2. Does everybody have their book?

4. Use of the singular *they/their* form. This construction is becoming increasingly acceptable. However, classroom teachers need to be aware that state and/or national assessments may not regard this construction as correct.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

1. Does each student have his book?

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

1. Does each student have their book?

The Pseudo-Generic *Man*: Creating Gender Balance

Like the pseudo-generic form *he*, the use of the word *man* to represent both women and men excludes women, and it

minimalizes their contributions and their worth as human beings. To make language more inclusive:

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- mankind
- man's achievements
- the best man for the job
- man the controls
- man the ticket booth

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- humanity, human beings, people
- human achievements
- the best person for the job
- take charge of
- staff the ticket booth

(a) Some forms pose greater problems than those listed above:

- *man-made* (as in *man-made materials*). *Artificial materials* or even *synthetic materials* has less positive connotations when substituted here.
- *freshman* (as in certain official names such as freshman orientation). *First-year student* is an alternative which may work.
- *alumni* which is the masculine plural form; *alumnae* is the feminine plural.

(b) When describing a job or career both men and women might perform, avoid using a combined term that specifies gender.

- **Avoid exclusionary words and phrases such as**

- chairman/chairwomen
- businessman/businesswoman
- congressman/congresswoman
- policeman/policewoman
- salesman/saleswoman
- fireman
- mailman

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- chair, coordinator, moderator, presiding officer, head, chairperson
- business executive, manager, businessperson
- congressional representative
- police officer
- salesperson, sales clerk, sales representative
- firefighter
- postal worker, letter carrier

Titles, Labels, and Names: Promoting Gender Equity

The titles used to name people and occupations often reflect inequitable assumptions about males and females. Gender-fair language promotes more inclusive and equitable representations of both females and males, opening possibilities rather than restricting choices.

(a) Identify men and women in the same way. Diminutive or special forms to name women are usually unnecessary. In most cases, generic terms such as *doctor*, *judge*, or *actor* include both genders. Only occasionally are alternate forms needed, and in these cases, the alternate form replaces both the masculine and the feminine titles.

- **Avoid exclusionary words and phrases such as**

- stewardess
- authoress

- poetess
- coed
- male nurse
- lady lawyer
- woman doctor

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- flight attendant, steward
- author
- poet
- student
- nurse
- lawyer
- doctor

Note: If the gender of a professional is important to a person seeking professional assistance, exceptions may occur. For example, a woman may prefer to visit a gynecologist who is a female. In such cases, the effects of gender labeling can be mitigated by changing the gender-laden descriptor to a noun, emphasizing the professional title, and de-emphasizing gender, i. e., *a woman who is a doctor* rather than *woman doctor*, *a male who is a nurse* rather than *male nurse*.

(b) Seek alternatives to language that omits, patronizes, or trivializes women, as well as to language that reinforces stereotyped images of both women and men.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- I'll have my girl do that job.
- Maria is a career woman.
- You guys go ahead.
- The ladies on the committee all supported the bill.
- Pam had lunch with the girls at the office.
- This is a man-sized job.
- old maid; spinster

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- I'll ask my assistant (or secretary) to do that job.
- Maria is a professional. Maria is a doctor.
- students, class, folks, all of you, third graders
- The women on the committee supported the bill.
- Pam had lunch with the women at the office.
- This is a complex (huge, enormous, difficult) job.
- single person

(c) Treat women and men in a parallel manner.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- The reporter interviewed Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Mrs. Sandra Day O'Connor (or Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Sandra Day O'Connor).
- The reading list included Jane Austen, Joyce, Proust, and Virginia Woolf.
- The steward seated Mr. Clinton and his lovely wife Hillary.
- The invitation was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Michael Webber.
- The invitation was addressed to Dr. and Mrs. Michael Webber (when both are doctors).

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- The reporter interviewed William Rehnquist and Sandra Day O'Connor (or Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justice O'Connor).
- The reading list included Austen, Joyce, Proust, and Woolf (or Jane Austen, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf).
- The steward seated Mr. and Mrs. Clinton.
- The invitation was addressed to Dr. Olivia and Mr. Michael Webber.
- The invitation was addressed to Drs. Michael and Olivia Webber.

(d) Use courtesy titles that promote gender equity. Courtesy titles that label a woman in regard to her relationship to a man (her marital status) or forms of address that depict a woman as the mere appendage of her husband trivialize women or render them invisible.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- Miss, Mrs.
- Mrs. Michael Webber
- Mr. and Mrs. Michael Webber

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- Ms.
- Ms. Olivia Webber
- Ms. Olivia Webber and Mr. Michael Webber

Note: Too often, people substitute *Ms.* for *Miss* and keep using *Mrs.* for married women, defeating the original purpose of adopting *Ms.* to create an equitable form of address for all women regardless of marital status. Use *Ms.* for married as well as unmarried women.

(e) Do not label athletic teams according to gender.

- **Avoid exclusionary words and phrases such as**

- girl pitcher or lady pitcher
- the Lady Cardinals

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- pitcher
- the Cardinals

Gender Stereotypes: Strategies for Reducing Negative Effects

Gender stereotypes limit and trivialize both females and males, presenting an inaccurate view of the world and its possibilities. Such misrepresentations constrain communication.

(a) Do not represent certain jobs or roles as only appropriate for, or held by, women or men, i.e., farmers are men and elementary teachers are women. Doing so makes gender-based assumptions. When referring to a job or role, use a gender-specific pronoun only if the gender of the person is known.

- **Avoid exclusionary forms such as**

- Dear Mothers, Please bake cookies for our class party.
- NCTE convention attendees and their wives are invited.
- The policy manual states that a principal must take attendance at his faculty meetings (the principal's gender is unknown).

- **Choose inclusionary alternatives**

- Dear Families, Please bake cookies for our class party.
- NCTE convention attendees and their guests are invited.
- The policy manual states that a principal must take attendance at all faculty meetings.

(b) Do not represent females and males as possessing stereotypic gendered attributes. For example, do not always imply that:

- girls are timid and boys are brave
- males are admired for their accomplishments and women for their physical attributes
- females are passive and males are active.

Textual Citations: Reducing the Effects of Language That Is Not Gender-Fair

When citing from texts, make a choice whether to use a directly stated passage or a paraphrase of the wording. Quoted passages cannot be altered, but there are a number of options for making language more inclusive when passages are dated and/or contain nonequitable language.

- (a) Recast the material, changing a direct quotation into a paraphrase that fits the sense of the discussion and retains the original author's intent and idea.
- (b) Point out the gender-biased nature of the passage to defuse its power. Thomas Jefferson stated, "All men are created equal." Of course, had he written during current times, he surely would have said all people are created equal.
- (c) Make substantial revisions or deletions when language is gender-biased or when stereotyped assumptions about males and females pervade a passage.
- (d) If none of these options work, consider avoiding the passage altogether whenever doing so does not detract from the writing's content, tone, or purpose.

Implications of the Guidelines

Balancing the Representation of Females and Males

As important as language is, making minor changes in vocabulary and usage to achieve gender fairness is virtually futile if underlying assumptions about gender restrict the people represented in texts to traditional roles. Simply changing *cavemen* to *cave dweller* or *actress* to *actor* will do little to promote gender fairness when female voices are absent or underrepresented in texts. Attempts must be made to provide gender balance through the careful selection of materials.

1. A balance of literature by and about both women and men should be included whenever possible.
2. Materials should be chosen to emphasize gender equity and to show males and females in traditional and nontraditional roles.
3. Noninclusive texts and classic pieces can provide a focus for discussion of gender roles and gender equity. They should be placed in proper historical context and should be balanced by other texts that show gender-fair roles and assumptions.
4. Trade books, texts, videos, and other media resources should be chosen to show females and males actively participating in a variety of situations at home, work, or play.
5. In organizing lists of materials and educational activities, avoid separation by gender. Choose headings and activities that do not assume stereotypic male and female interests. For example, use categories such as *exploration* or *friendship* rather than *books for boys* or *women's videos*. Avoid promoting competition of girls against boys, i.e., *girls vs. boys in a spelling bee*; *a debate with males taking one side of the issue, females the other*. Avoid assuming gendered interests and abilities, i.e., *girls decorate the bulletin board*, *boys boot up the computer*, *girls are cheerleaders*, *boys play sports*.
6. Present gender-equitable examples by alternating male and female names and by avoiding the use of stereotyped gender roles. When discussing roles traditionally held by males, use examples of females in those roles; use examples of males in roles traditionally held by females.

Promoting Gender-Fair Discourse Practices

1. Praise, encourage, and respond to contributions of females and males equally.
2. Call on females as often as males to answer both factual and complex questions.
3. Create a classroom atmosphere where females are not interrupted by others more often than males.
4. Establish collaborative groups composed of both males and females to provide opportunities for all voices to be heard.
5. Value intellect; avoid references to appearance and physical attributes.
6. Choose females for leadership positions as often as males.
7. Avoid comments or humor that demean or stereotype males or females.

Implementing the Guidelines

These guidelines for gender-fair language use are suggestions applicable to writers, speakers, contributors to the publications of professional organizations, conference-session presenters, designers of curriculum and materials, and educators at all levels.

For the editors of NCTE publications, however, the guidelines are a statement of editorial policy. An editor's task is to rewrite whenever necessary to eliminate language that is awkward, inconsistent, or inaccurate. In the case of language inconsistent with these guidelines, the editor's duty is to question the author's vocabulary or usage. The author has the right to insist on its use, but a footnote will be included to reflect such insistence.

The choices suggested in these guidelines are intended as additions to style sheets and manuals already in use.

Please refer to "NCTE Manuscript Preparation Guidelines" available online at <http://www.ncte.org/pubs/publish/books/107520.htm> [<http://www.ncte.org/pubs/publish/books/107520.htm>].

Educators seeking additional suggestions of strategies and materials should refer to "Guidelines for a Gender-Balanced Curriculum in English Language Arts Pre-K to Grade 6" (<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/107636> [<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/107636>]) and "Guidelines for a Gender-Balanced Curriculum in English Language Arts Grade 7-12" (<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/116049> [<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/116049>]), pamphlets published by NCTE's Women in Literacy and Life Assembly.

Resources for Further Reference

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