

How to Use Generic Pronouns

Fairness in gender has become an important concept in communication. Authors who strive for nonsexist language will not find it acceptable to use the word 'he' as an ambiguous pronoun.

Use specific pronouns only to identify a specific sex.

- Example. *Provide a pencil to each one so that he can complete the form.*
- Improvement. *Provide each boy with a pencil so that he can complete the form.*

Write without pronouns

Restructure sentences to avoid pronoun usage.

- Example. *When the director authorizes funds, he will consult with the treasurer.*
- Improvement. *The director will consult with the treasurer to authorize funds.*

Consider using the imperative mood to cut words and make your sentence more direct

The imperative mood is especially useful in instructional texts and how-to's such as the one you are reading.

- Example. *The volunteer will give his notes to the coordinator.*
- Improvement. *Give your notes to the volunteer coordinator.*

Try to replace singular pronouns with plural pronouns, if you can do so without altering the meaning of a sentence

Be careful that singular nouns are not matched to plural pronouns.

- Example. *Each employee will secure his personal items in a locker.*
- Debated usage. *Each employee will secure their personal items in a locker.*
- Improvement. *All employees will secure their personal items in a locker.*

You may replace specific pronouns with double pronouns such as "he or she" or "her and him."

This may, however, sound exceedingly awkward.

NOTE: It was once technically correct to use the masculine when the gender is unknown or when referring to a mixed-gender group. (1 policeman + 1 policewoman = 2 policemen.) However, this usage is currently regarded as sexist. Furthermore, it may mistakenly imply that the group spoken of is entirely male. Therefore, in all but the most formal uses, the generic use of plural pronouns ("they" or "their") have become acceptable substitutes for the generic use of the masculine singular. (In fact, despite the opposition of 19th and 20th century grammarians, this generic use of the plural pronoun has been used by many fine authors for centuries, and is as both as logical and as old as the generic masculine singular.)

- Example. *Each aide must complete his schedule for the week.*
- Possible Improvement (though awkward). *Each aide must complete her or his schedule for the week.*

Replace a possessive pronoun with a simple article.

- Example. *After completing his schedule, the aide will place it in the director's file.*
- Improvement. *After completing a schedule, the aide will place it in the director's file.*

Replace specific pronouns with the passive voice

Do not overuse this method.

- Example. *When an employee leaves a facility, he should report the time."*
- Improvement. *The time should be reported by an employee who leaves a facility."*

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS		
	SINGULAR	PLURAL
FIRST PERSON	I, me, my, mine	we, our, ours, us
SECOND PERSON	you, your, yours	you, your, yours
THIRD PERSON	it, she, he, her, him, its, hers, his	they, them, their, theirs

Use a gender-neutral pronoun system if your meaning will be understood

Some notable systems include Spivak pronouns (e, em, eir) or the Xe pronouns (xe, xim, xer). However, as none of these neologisms are widely adopted, they should be used with caution. They might not be understood unless explained, and explaining them might allow the topic of gender and linguistics to distract from whatever you wanted to talk about.

Tips

- Sometimes acceptable language for speaking is not acceptable for writing. You may say, "Everyone left the building when they finished work." but it is not appropriate to follow "everyone", "anyone" or "anybody" with "they" or "them" when writing.
- When writing instructions for a general audience, use ambiguous language so the readers will focus on your topic. Don't target one sex unless that is your intention.
- Singular they is universally understood and is recommended by some modern style guides, but is considered substandard usage by others. Some people feel strongly that using "they" for a person who might or might not be plural to be no better than using "he" for a person who might or might not be male.

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