

Avoiding Gender-Biased Language

While using the male form of labels and pronouns to refer to a mixed-gender group *used* to be acceptable, formal writing in the English language now must be **gender-neutral**. This can be tricky to negotiate sometimes, so here are a few tips to prevent your writing from appearing biased or outdated:

A. Labels

Replace labels such as “mailman” or “stewardess” with gender-neutral “mail carrier” or “flight attendant.” Similarly, broader terms like “mankind” can be replaced by “humankind,” “humanity,” etc.

Typically, a gender-neutral form for labels exists; it is only a matter of finding it. In the event that such a label does not come to mind, simply substitute “person” in place of “man.”

B. Pronouns

While we know that it is no longer acceptable to use the male-form of pronouns to refer to mixed-gender groups (e.g., “The researcher should be careful not to bring *his* own prejudices into *his* academic work.”), the issue is tricky, because English lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun.

Here are three useful approaches to avoiding gendered pronouns, followed by different versions of our example sentence and a pro and con for each:

1. Use the gender-free plural form or the second person.

Examples:

“Researchers should be careful not to bring *their* own prejudices into *their* academic work.”

“*You*, as a researcher, should be careful not to bring *your* own prejudices into *your* academic work.”

Pro: This approach completely avoids gender as an issue in your writing.

Con: Overuse of either the plural or second person can, depending on the form of writing, appear forced, especially with second person.

Warning: Make sure you make the subject of the sentence plural when you change the pronouns. In the example sentence, “a researcher” becomes “researchers.”

2. Include both genders simultaneously: s/he, his/her, or him/her.

Example: “The researcher should be careful not to bring *his or her* own prejudices into *his or her* academic work.”

Pro: This approach is perhaps the most clear in terms of gender equity.

Con: This approach may be stylistically awkward at times.

3. Alternate between genders.

Example: If, in one paragraph you make use of the female pronoun: “The researcher should be careful not to bring *her* prejudices into academic work,” make an effort in another paragraph to utilize the male pronoun: “*He* should be especially careful during the process of selecting a topic worthy of study.”

Pro: This approach, again, shows a conscious effort to balance the usage of both genders.

Con: It may be difficult as a writer to remember to balance male and female references. Also, be careful to avoid constant shifting, which may only confuse the reader.

Ultimately, it is up to you to select the approach that is best suited for your own unique writing demands. Simple awareness of the inherent biases of our language will typically clear up many of the more egregious errors concerning gender usage.