

Business Writing Skills III: Avoiding Sexist Language

By Linda Elizabeth Alexander

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Many businesspeople are unfamiliar with business writing. Concise writing will build your business because you will better connect with customers and prospects. In this four-part series, I will teach you how to make your writing and other business correspondence clearer, understandable, and more direct.

Avoiding Sexist Language in Writing
By Linda Elizabeth Alexander

Why avoid sexist language in your business writing? Biased language can alienate any potential reader. If you alienate your readers, you lose credibility. Without their faith in your words, you have lost your audience and cannot make your argument. Therefore, avoiding sexism in your writing benefits everyone.

Here are some tips for avoiding common mistakes regarding sexist language.

He/She

The use of a masculine pronoun to refer to both genders is offensive to many people. Also, using terms such as "man" to define people can often be confusing - are you referring only to "men" or to "all people"? The easiest and best way to get around this is to rewrite the sentence in the plural, or avoid using a pronoun altogether.

Example: The executive cannot do his job properly until he understands how.

Correct to: Executives cannot do their jobs properly until

they understand how.

You could also say "The executive cannot do his or her job properly until he or she understands how." However, this tends to be clumsy, especially after being used repeatedly.

Ms./Miss/Mrs.

Miss refers to an unmarried woman. Mrs. Refers to a married woman. Ms. is a universally accepted form of addressing a woman regardless of her marital status. This should be adopted whenever possible.

However, there are women who indicate a preference for either Miss or Mrs., and that preference should be honored if known. When addressing general audiences, or if you are not sure of the woman's marital status, always use Ms.

Other ways to avoid sexism in your writing:

Don't assume that a particular job is filled by a particular gender: there are many female construction workers and doctors; there are also many nurses and office assistants that are male.

Instead, talk about "mail carriers" instead of mailmen, "flight attendants" instead of stewardesses, and "police officers" instead of policemen. Certain job titles refer to both men and women; "lineman" is one such example.

Try not to be confusing by going overboard with terms such as "saleswoman" or "salesman" or "salesperson." Instead, use simple words like "sales associate" or "chair" instead of "chairman/woman/person."

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Linda Elizabeth Alexander is a business writer specializing in web and sales copy. Be a better writer! Subscribe to her FREE ezine today and learn tips, trips and tools for improving your writing skills at work!
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