

Tips For Non-Sexist Writing

By Tanja Rosteck

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Tanja Rosteck
tanja@words4nerds.com

Words4Nerds <http://www.words4nerds.com>

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Using gender-neutral language is more than just "political correctness" - good business writing communicates without ambiguity. Calling attention to gender (as well as ethnicity, religion, and so on) when not specifically appropriate for the situation will take the focus off your message and dilute its effectiveness.

Follow these tips for making your business communications clear and compelling without showing gender bias.

** Use gender-neutral terms.

Most people know to say "firefighter" instead of "fireman," or "flight attendant" instead of "stewardess". But it's common to still hear all people referred to as "mankind", or a newly-wedded couple as "man and wife". Why?!

The usual argument is that "mankind" is merely a generic term and you're some kind of extremist if you get offended by it. But what if all people were consistently referred to as "womankind"? Neither term is a fair representation. "Humanity", on the other hand, makes everyone feel included.

** Use the terms consistently - for everyone.

I've seen countless newspapers always use the term "chairman" when referring to a male, but the term "chairperson" only when referring to a female. This is a very sneaky way of *appearing* to be gender-neutral without actually being so.

Generic terms must be used consistently for everyone, or else there's really no point. Use "chairperson" (or better yet, just "chair") regardless of gender.

If you must refer to both genders, use parallel phrasing. This means using two equal terms, such as "ladies and gentlemen" or "men and women" - NOT "man and wife" or "the men's and girls' sports teams".

** He said / she said...

"It's too clunky" is a popular excuse for not using gender-neutral writing, especially when dealing with the he/she issue (commonly referred to as "the pronoun problem"). But there are a lot of creative ways to still get your message across clearly and without bias - there's no need for literary gymnastics.

Solve the pronoun problem by using plurals. For instance, "When a customer calls, he expects an immediate response" could be re-written as "When customers call, they expect an immediate response."

Or, remove pronouns altogether: "Every subscriber was sent his or her receipt" could be re-phrased as, "Receipts were sent to all subscribers."

** Let the context be your guide.

Unless the situation specifically demands it, don't bother even mentioning gender. For example, business letters to an unknown recipient shouldn't start with "Dear Sir/Madam" - it's old-fashioned and overly formal, and what if the recipient (such an 18-year-old entrepreneur) doesn't really identify with either term?

Better to open with, "Dear Entrepreneur" (or other job title). Or skip the formal salutation and use an attention-grabbing marketing headline instead, such as "Want to know the secret to small business success?"

Learning to write in a non-sexist style needn't be a chore or something you "have" to do to appease the political-correctness set. In fact, it can open up a whole new avenue of creativity in your writing as you discover different ways of turning a phrase. But remember, the key to effective business writing is keeping your message clear and focused - regardless of the terminology used.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tanja Rosteck is the president of Words4Nerds, providing software companies with professional and affordable online help, user manuals, installation guides and web design/content. Visit Words4Nerds online at <http://www.words4nerds.com> - check out our free monthly e-zine, chock-full of tips for improving the quality of your writing and product documentation.

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