Gender-Neutral Language

courtesy of the
Franklin & Marshall College
Writing Center

Why Gender-Neutral Language:

Writers and speakers who wish to be understood and taken seriously need to be aware of gender-neutral language – language that includes both genders. A reporter who writes of a new wage increase for “postmen” is presenting false information, for all postal employees will receive a wage increase. And the speaker who addresses a group of men and women as “businessmen” is excluding a part of the audience. Showing more sensitivity, the speaker would use an inclusive term such as “business professionals” or “executives.” It is important to write inclusively – to use language which includes everyone – in order to be precise and understood.

Generic / False Generic

A generic term is an all-purpose, gender-free, inclusive word. Examples, along with “postal employees” and executives,” include people, civilians, and voters. Often writers try to pass off words such as mankind, spokesman, and chairman as generics. These words are actually false generics, words which claim to include everyone, but do not. The mostly widely used false generics are he, him, and his. These masculine pronouns, if used generically, omit females.

Ways to Avoid the Generic Use of “He / His / Him”

In an effort to be inclusive, many speakers and writers use he or she and his or her. Certainly this alternative eliminates the false generic “he / him / his,” but it leads to choppy, repetitive writing. As the following examples suggest, there are other more gracefully ways to be gender neutral in avoiding the false generic “he / his / him.”

1) Eliminate the pronoun from your sentence or replace it with “a,” “an,” or “the.”

Example: The student should complete the work assigned to him, but he should not make his test papers into paper airplanes.

Can Become: The student should complete the assigned work, but should not make the test papers into paper airplanes.
2) Make the pronoun and the noun to which it refers plural rather than singular.

   Example: I will contact each student and tell him when to come for a conference.

   Can Become: I will contact all the students and tell them when to come for conferences.

3) Substitute “you / your / yours” when you are addressing your reader directly.

   Example: If a student misses two successive appointments, he will lose his standing appointment.

   Can Become: If you miss two successive appointments, you will lose your standing appointment.

4) Substitute “I / my / mine / me” or “we / our / ours / us” when that is more accurate or appropriate.

   Example: The student agrees to pay for any damage he does to the residence hall.

   Can become: I agree to pay for any damage I do to the residence hall. OR We agree to pay for any damage we do to the residence hall.

5) Change an “if” clause to a “who” clause.

   Example: If a student comes late to class, he interrupts the lecture or discussion.

   Can Become: The student who comes late to class interrupts the lecture or discussion.

6) Change “when” clauses to “on / upon” clauses.

   Example: When a student learns of the death of a close relative, he should immediately notify the Student Life Office.

   Can become: Upon learning of the death of a close relative, a student should immediately notify the Student Life Office.

If all else fails, use either “she or he” or “he or she.”

   Example: Each student is responsible for his or her own assignment.
**Practice With Gender Neutral Language**

Rewrite the following sentences so that the language is gender neutral.

1. The creationist has a much stronger basis for his faith than does the evolutionist.

2. These benefits range from those given to the child himself to those given to the world community.

3. Is the gourmet a happy person because he is healthy and enjoys eating, something that he must do every day of his life?

4. If a student is locked into such a program, he may find he has to take courses he dislikes.

5. The politicians I most admire are Henry Kissinger and Mrs. Thatcher.

6. A breadwinner has a hard time supporting his family these days.

7. Housewives will be glad to have that supermarket open again.

8. Pioneers moved west, taking their wives and children with them.

9. Consider, if you will, the plight of the lawyer. An amiable fellow, he is required by the very nature of the legal system to play the role of adversary. (Some see his courtroom manner as perverse rather than adverse.) A righteous man, he has to subvert his personal beliefs about a client in order to protect his legal rights. (An outraged public points its finger at him: “Look at that lawyer getting that guy off!”) A masterful negotiator, he finds both parties unhappy with a settlement. (That’s how he knows it’s a fair settlement; neither party is able to gloat over it.)