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Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language

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Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language[1] (/?nonsexist#1)

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APA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession

Foreword

The following Guidelines were originally published in the *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* in February 1986 (Vol. 59, Number 3, pp. 471-482). They were prepared at the request of the Executive Committee of the Western Division (now called the Central Division) of the American Philosophical Association by the APA's National Committee on the Status of Women. Committee member Virginia Warren undertook to write the report, and after discussion by that Committee, it was submitted to the Executive Committees of the APA's three Divisions. All three Divisions passed resolutions encouraging members to keep the report in mind in preparing papers for divisional programs and asked the APA National Office to provide copies to members on request.

This reprinted report, slightly abridged by the author, is intended for free distribution to members of the Association, and members may wish to share it with colleagues in other disciplines as well. (For additional copies, write to the APA National Office, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716 or telephone (302) 831-1112.)

Publication of this report by the APA does not imply formal endorsement, either by the Divisions or by the National Board of Officers, of any specific or compulsory set of rules. Rather, it reflects an organizational conviction that philosophers should take special care to avoid giving needless and unintended offense. Members may find the suggestions in this report helpful in ensuring sensitivity to all the considerations that may influence philosophical conclusions.

Eric Hoffman
Executive Director
American Philosophical Association

For several reasons we, as philosophers, should be particularly sensitive to the issue of nonsexist language--that is, language whose "use creates, constitutes, promotes, or exploits an unfair or irrelevant distinction between the sexes" (Mary Vetterling-Braggin, 1981, p.3). First, our profession has long focused on language. Accordingly, we are attuned to the emotive force of words and to the ways in which language influences thought and behavior. Second, we pride ourselves on our willingness to question assumptions. Yet the uncritical use of sexist language may blind us to our having adopted a particular value-laden perspective. Such blindness may systematically distort our theories and interfere with the careers and lives of many of our colleagues and students, both female and male. Third, as scholars and teachers we pursue truth wherever it leads: to the reform of our ordinary concepts and beliefs and, if necessary, of our everyday language.

Our readers and listeners may have been receiving a message that we never intended to send. Rather than encouraging a superficial recasting of words, these guidelines are designed to foster a deeper appreciation of how easily bias slips into our thoughts and theories.

The Generic Use of 'Man' and 'He'

The generic use of 'man' and 'he' (and 'his', 'him', 'himself') is commonly considered gender-neutral. The case against the generic use of these terms does not rest on rare instances in which they refer ambiguously to 'male' or 'human being'. Rather, *every* occurrence of their generic use is problematic.

First, Janice Moulton persuasively argues, in "The Myth of the Neutral 'Man'" (in Vetterling-Braggin, 1981, pp. 100-115; revised from Vetterling-Braggin, *et al*, 1977, pp. 124-37), that 'he' and 'man' used generically are really not gender-neutral terms at all. ('Person' and 'human' are genuinely gender-neutral.) As evidence, Moulton offers many examples of statements in which 'man' and 'he' *unambiguously* refer to all humanity, rather than to males alone, yet are false, funny, or insulting. For example, "Some men are female" is irredeemably odd, while "Some human beings are female" is fine. Similarly, "Each applicant is to list the name of his husband or wife" is odd; and even using "his spouse" disquiets more than using "his or her spouse."

Second, empirical evidence supports Moulton's claim that regardless of the author's intention the generic 'man' is *not* interpreted gender neutrally.[2] (/?nonsexist#2) Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976) cite a study in which college students chose pictures to illustrate chapters of a sociology textbook. Those with chapters entitled "Society," "Industrial Life," and "Political Behavior" tended to select pictures of both females and males. However, when the same chapters were named "Social Man," "Industrial Man," and "Political Man," students of both sexes tended to select pictures of males only. With some chapters the differences [between the two groups] reached magnitudes of 30 to 40 percent. The authors concluded, "This is rather convincing evidence that when you use the word man generically, people do tend to think male, and tend not to think female" (Miller and Swift, 1976, p. 21). This study also finds that the generic 'man' leaves out more than women: "As the image of capitalist, playboy, and hard hat are called forth by the word 'man', so is the other side of the coin called forth by 'behavior' or 'life'--women, children, minorities, dissent and protest" (Miller and Swift, 1976, p. 23).

Third, using the generic 'he' and 'man' is problematic because it often leads us to omit the distinctive elements of female experience and behavior. For example, a sentence beginning, "If a student is conscientious, *he* is probably a good . . . ," will likely be ended with "son"--even though "good son," "good daughter," and "good child" connote different things. If the sentence had begun, "A conscientious student is probably a good . . . ," a likely finale would be "son or daughter" or "child."

In sum, there are convincing reasons, both empirical and conceptual, for avoiding the generic 'he' and 'man' and for specifically including females. Hence, it is inadequate to state in an opening footnote that, for the remainder of the letter, article or book, 'he' shall stand for 'he or she' and 'man' for all humanity. What authors intend is not the issue. Good intentions not carried through are not good enough.

Addressing the Professional

Forms of address indicate attitudes about status and/or worth. Children often go by first names while calling adults by surname and title. Whenever males are referred to by title, use the appropriate title for female professionals (Ms., Dr., Professor), rather than their first names.

Sexual Stereotyping: Distortions and Silence

One way that sexual stereotypes enter philosophic discourse is through examples. Since philosophic examples are usually illustrative, it is often thought that their presuppositions need not be checked for sexist content. However, examples may manifest sexist bias: (a) through embodying explicit or implicit sexual stereotypes (e.g., by contrasting female beauty with male success, or by using this hackneyed example of complex question: "When did you stop beating your wife?"); (b) through adopting a male perspective (as when using the generic 'man' or 'he' leads one to say "his wife"); and (c) through silence--the absence of examples explicitly referring to women.

A second mode of entry for sexual stereotypes has been through the labeling of some roles as predominantly male or female. To assume that all lawyers or epistemologists are male deletes the female segment of the profession and reinforces the assumption that only males are "proper" professionals. Moreover, to assume that homemaking and child rearing tasks are the primary concern of all and only women excludes males from these roles, even as it ignores women's other concerns.

Finally, omitting women's distinctive interests and experience also perpetuates sexual stereotypes. The generic use of 'he' and 'man' are part of the more general problem of women's "invisibility" in philosophic discourse. Some empirical data on sexist language indicate that if women are not *specifically included* (e.g., through using females in examples, or the term "he or she"), even genuinely gender-neutral prose (e.g., using plural pronouns) tends to be heard as referring to males only.[3] (/?nonsexist#3)

Summary of Guidelines for the Nonsexist Use of Language

When constructing examples and theories, remember to *include* those human activities, interests, and points of view which traditionally have been associated with females.

Eliminate the generic use of 'he' by:

- using plural nouns
- deleting 'he', 'his', and 'him' altogether
- substituting articles ('the', 'a', 'an') for 'his'; and 'who' for 'he'
- substituting 'one', 'we', or 'you'
- minimizing use of indefinite pronouns (e.g., 'everybody', 'someone')
- using the passive voice [use sparingly]
- substituting nouns for pronouns [use sparingly]

Eliminate the generic use of 'man':

- for 'man', substitute 'person'/'people', 'individual(s)', 'human(s)', 'human being(s)'
- for 'mankind', substitute 'humankind', 'humanity', 'the human race'
- for 'manhood', substitute 'adulthood', 'maturity'
- delete unnecessary references to generic 'man'

Eliminate sexism when addressing persons formally by:

- using 'Ms' instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs.', even when a woman's marital status is known[4] (/?nonsexist#4)
- using a married woman's first name instead of her husband's (e.g., "Ms. Annabelle Lee" not "Mrs. Herman Lee")
- using the corresponding title for females ('Ms.', 'Dr.', 'Prof.') whenever a title is appropriate for males

- using 'Dear Colleague' or 'Editor' or 'Professor', etc. in letters to unknown persons (instead of 'Dear Sir', 'Gentlemen')

Eliminate sexual stereotyping of roles by:

- using the same term (which avoids the generic 'man') for both females and males (e.g., 'department chair' or 'chairperson'), or by using the corresponding verb (e.g., 'to chair')
- not calling attention to irrelevancies (e.g., 'lady lawyer', 'male nurse')

Example of Sexist Language with Nonsexist Alternatives		
Example	**Preferred Alternative**	**Comment**
Example 1		
The philosopher uses **his** reason to guide him.	Philosophers use their reason to guide them.	Use *plural* nouns.
	OR: The philosopher uses reason as a guide.	*Delete* 'he', 'his', or 'him' altogether, rewording if necessary.
Example 2		
The student did it and **he** was glad.	The student did it and was glad.	*Delete* 'he', using compound verbs.
Example 3		
The department chair must submit **his** budget by March 1st.	The department chair must submit a budget by March 1st.	Use *articles* ('the', 'a', 'an') instead of personal pronouns.
	OR: The budget must be submitted by the department chair by March 1st.	Use *passive voice* for verbs. (Use sparingly.)
Example 4		
If the writer plans ahead, **he** will save a lot of effort.	The writer who plans ahead will save a lot of effort.	Use '*who*' for 'he'.
Example 5		
Take seriously what your Dean says about falling enrollments. **He** knows about current demographic trends.	Take seriously what your Dean says about falling enrollments. This person knows about current demographic trends.	Substitute a *noun* for the pronoun. (Use sparingly.)
Example 6		

As someone grows older, **he** grows more reflective.	As one grows older, one grows more reflective.	Use '*one*', '*you*', '*we*', instead of indefinite pronouns.
	OR: In growing older, people grow more reflective.	Or reword, *deleting pronouns* altogether.
	CONTROVERSIAL (FOR INFORMAL CONTEXTS ONLY): As someone grows older, they grow more reflective.	The National Council of Teachers of English (1975, p. 3) says, "In all but strictly formal usage, plural pronouns have become acceptable substitutes for the maculine singular" following an indefinite pronoun. Kett and Underwood (1978, p. 38) predict that such informal usage will eventually become acceptable in all contexts.
Example 7		
Students are different: one may be assertive in **his** interpersonal relations, while another may be timid in **his** approach to the world.	Students are different: one may relate to others assertively, while another may approach the world timidly.	*Delete* 'his', rewording.
	OR: Students are different: one may be assertive in his or her interpersonal relations, while another may be timid in approaching the world.	Use '*he* or *she*, '*his* or *her*' sparingly, in conjunction with other methods. ('Himself or herself' is awkward. 'S/he' breaks down when one come to 'her/his'.) 'She or he' and 'her or him' are fine. *Be consistent*: do not begin by using 'he or she' and lapse into the generic 'he'. Avoid 'he (she)', 'men (and women)', etc., since including females parenthetically suggests that females are an afterthought.
	OR: Students are different: one may be assertive in her interpersonal relations, while another may be timid in his approach to the world.	*Alternate masculine and feminine pronouns* when giving examples. (CAUTION: avoid reinforcing sexual stereotypes. Switching 'her' and 'his' in the preferred alternative results in a sentence as sexist as the original.).
Example 8		
"When a nurse comes on duty **she**. . ." is as sexist as "When a physician comes on duty **he**. . ."		Use the above methods to avoid the generic 'she' for traditionally female occupations.
Example 9		

Consider what the ordinary (common) **man** thinks about justice.	Consider what ordinary people (individuals) think about justice.	Using the plural noun avoids the generic '*he*' later on.

Example 10

Reason is what distinguishes **man** from other animals.	Reason is what distinguishes humans (human beings) from other animals.	When '*man*' is used to contrast species, substitute '*humans*' or '*human beings*'. Use '*who*' for '*he*'.

Example 11

For Aristotle, **man** is, above all, Political **Man**.	Aristotle regarded human beings as inherently political.	No nonsexist counterparts to '*Political Man*', '*Economic Man*', etc. preserve the exact flavor of these terms-perhaps because they focus on stereotypically male behavior. Note that much of '*Economic Woman's*' labor is still unpaid, and hence is excluded from the G.N.P. Sexist language may camouflage a theory's sexist assumptions.

Example 12

the **brotherhood** of **man**	the human family	
feelings of **brotherhood** or **fraternity**	feelings of kinship, solidarity, affection collegiality, unity, congeniality, community	
the Founding **Fathers**	the Founders (founding leaders)	
the **Father** of relativity theory	the founder (initiator) of relativity theory	

Example 13 - Salutations in Business Letters

Dear **Sir**, **Gentlemen** (to an unknown person)	Dear Colleague, Dear Editor, Dear Professor, Dear Staff Member, etc.	Do not presume that people are male until proven otherwise. Do not use '*Dear Sir*' or '*Gentlemen*' just because you are sure that there are no women on that committee. If '*To Whom it May Concern*' seems too brusque and all else fails, adopt a modified memo style ('*Attention: Order Department*') or omit the salutation entirely.
Dear **Sir**, Dear **Mr.** Green (when first name and sex are unknown)	Dear Professor (Doctor, Editor) Green, Dear J. Green	
Dear **Mrs.** Green (when a female's marital status is unknown)	Dear Ms. Green, Dear J. Green, Dear Jean Green	Do not presume that women are married until proven otherwise.

Example 14

man and wife	husband and wife	
men . . . **ladies**; or **men** . . . **girls**	men . . . women	Of course, if the ages are right,'*men* . . . *girls*' may be appropriate, as may '*women* . . . *boys*'.
three **male students** and two **coeds**	five students (two females and three males)	

Example 15

males and females	females and males	Varying the order (if the content does not require the conventional order) both counters the implication that males take priority over females, and enlivens discourse by avoiding cliche.
husbands and wives	wives and husbands	
men and women	women and men	
sons and daughters	daughters and sons	
descendants of **Adam and Eve**	descendants of Eve and Adam	
his and her	her and his	

Example 16

Congressman, **Congresswoman**	U.S. Representative, member of Congress	Choose nonsexist labels for occupations.
poetess, stewardess, fireman, lady lawyer, male nurse, woman doctor	poet, flight attendant, firefighter, lawyer, nurse, doctor	The terms '*lawyer*', '*nurse*' and '*doctor*' include both males and females.

Example 17 - *Choice of Adjective** (/?nonsexist#a)

cautious men and **timid women**	cautious women and men; cautious people; timid men and women; timid people	Choose adjectives carefully. Sometimes we intend to attribute the same trait to females and males; yet, through choosing two stereotyped adjectives, we imply either that the two groups have different traits or that readers should evaluate the same trait differently for females and males. (Note: some adjectives have a different emotive or descriptive meaning when predicated of one sex or the other.)
ambitious men and **aggressive women**	ambitious men and women; ambitious people; aggressive women and men; aggressive people	

* Example 17 is from American Psychological Association (1977).*Back*

Notes

1. I gratefully acknowledge that these guidelines were modeled on those of the American Psychological Association (1977) and of the National Council of Teachers of English (1975). I also wish to thank the members of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession who offered many useful suggestions on earlier drafts--especially Mary Varney Rorty, who chaired the Committee, and whose

enthusiam and carefully worded comments and examples guided this project from the beginning. *(/? nonsexist#back1)*

2. Empirical studies are cited by Dale Spender (1980, pp. 152-54); and by Wendy Martyna, "Beyond the 'He/Man' Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language" *Signs*, Spring 1980, pp. 482-93). *Back (/? nonsexist#back2)*

3. Janet Hyde reports, in "Children's Understanding of Sexist Language" (*Developmental Psychology*, July 1984, pp. 697-706), that the stories elementary school and college students told were about females 12% of the time when a cue sentence used 'he', compared to 18% ('they') and 42% ('he or she'). *Back (/? nonsexist#back3)*

4. See Miller and Swift (1976, pp. 97-103) for the historical background of 'Ms.', 'Mrs.' and 'Miss'. See Vetterling-Braggin (1981, pp. 217-48) for a debate on the use of 'Ms.': "Michael Levin, "Vs. Ms.'"; L. M. Purdy, "Against 'Vs. Ms.'"; and Alan Soble, "Beyond the Miserable Vision of 'Vs. Ms.'" *Back (/? nonsexist#back4)*

5. To understand why 'lady lawyer' is objectionable, see Robin Lakoff, 1975, pp. 20-26; and Carolyn Korsmeyer, "The Hidden Joke: Generic Uses in Masculine Terminology" (in Vetterling-Braggin, 1981, pp. 122-24, 127-28; and in Vetterling-Braggin, *et al*, 1977, pp. 144-46, 149-50). *Back (/?nonsexist#back5)*

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- "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] Publication," November, 1975. Single copy available free from: National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.*** (/?nonsexist#c)
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- Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980. Spender gives a good summary and critique of the general literature on sexist language (pp. 7-51), and discusses the history of the generic use of 'man' and 'he' (pp. 147-60).
- Vetterling-Braggin, Mary, ed. *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1981. A thorough and lively exploration of recent philosophical literature on sexist language. Topics include: the definition of sexism and sexist language; the moral significance of using sexist language; the generic 'he' and 'man'; 'Ms.'; a comparison of sexist and racist language. Excellent.
- Vetterling-Braggin, Mary, Elliston, Frederick A., and English, Jane, eds. Feminism and Philosophy. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1977. This general anthology on the philosophy of feminism has five articles on sexist language.

Bibliography Update

** The "Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA [American Psychological Association] Journals," have undergone a revision and name change. The current version is known as *Guidelines to Reduce Bias in Language* and appears on pages 54 through 60 of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 4th edition (1994)*. Single copies are no longer available. *Back (/?nonsexist#backb)*

*** The "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] Publication," have been revised as of 1985. They are still available from the NCTE at a cost of $.75 for members and $1.00 for non-members. *Back (/?nonsexist#backc)*

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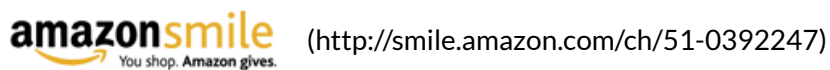id=434664)

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