

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat Guide to Using Gender-Inclusive Language in All Communications (updated March 2005)

Introduction

Forum Secretariat has a gender policy in place and requires that gender-inclusive language be used in all reports, presentations and communiqués produced by staff and consultants.

Women and men as groups of people participate everywhere in our society. Language, the basic tool of communication, must accurately reflect this participation. Gender-inclusive language addresses and includes women and men. As well as being a sign of equal treatment and respect, it is also a means for such treatment and respect. However, sexual stereotypes, demeaning references and words that exclude women are still found in everyday speech and in workplace communications. Such language is incompatible with the goal of gender equality.

This document contains information about gender-inclusive language and advice on how to eliminate gender bias from written, spoken, visual and audio communications.

One of the underlying principles of gender-inclusive language is that women and men are equal participants in development. In language, this equality takes the form of parallel word choices for both men and women, and the elimination of terms that exclude, stereotype or demean anyone. Whenever you write, strive for overall gender balance.

1. Word Order

Always putting men first in such phrases as *men and women, boys and girls, he or she, his and hers, male and female* can give the impression that women are afterthoughts or somehow less important than men. You may wish to alternate the word order in phrases like these, so that neither women nor men always go first. Rather than *ladies and gentlemen*, use generic terms that favour neither sex and more accurately reflect the purpose of the gathering or meeting. Examples are *colleagues, delegates, or members of the association*.

2. Respectful language

Some language reflects a lack of respect for women and men that trivializes or demeans their accomplishments. This language also creates stereotypes that can confuse, offend and alienate your audience and your co-workers.

- **Girls, Boys**

The terms *girl or boy* are not appropriate in the workplace, unless you are referring to a minor, or a child.

Instead of: The *girl* at the reception desk will be able to answer your questions. **or**
The garden *boy* will fix it for you.

Use: Our receptionist, Praveen Singh will be able to answer your questions; **or**
Our groundskeeper, John Dunlop will fix it for you;

- **Making Assumptions**

Avoid words and phrases that make assumptions about gender:

- Instead of:** Conference delegates and their wives are invited to attend the breakfast meeting.
Use: Conference delegates and their partners are invited to attend the breakfast meeting.

3. Forms of Address: General Rules

- **Professional Titles**

If a woman or man holds a professional or academic title, use it, e.g., *Dr. Singh*; *Professor Roberts*. When addressing a government minister who has taken her husband's last name, use *the Honourable* or *Hon.* without a courtesy title. You may also choose to address the minister simply by name, or as *Minister* if they concur.

- Instead of:** The Honourable Mrs. Sheila Hejka
Use: The Honourable Sheila Hejka; Hon. Sheila Hejka; Dear Sheila Hejka; Dear Minister

- **Writing to People You Do Not Know**

Certain names are obviously female or male. Others, like Robin, Sidney, Chris or Lesley, are ambiguous. It is acceptable to omit courtesy titles altogether, a practice that is especially helpful when the signature does not make sex or marital status clear. Do not assume a woman's marital status – always use *Ms*, unless they have specifically self-identified themselves as *Mrs* or *Miss* in previous communications.

- Instead of:** Dear Mrs. Chris Wilson; Dear Mr. Howard Golinki
Use: Dear Chris Wilson; Dear Howard Golinki

If you are writing to a person you do not know at all, use *Dear Sir or Madam*, *Dear Madam or Sir*, or address your letter to a specific title; e.g., *Dear Office Manager*, *Dear Financial Assistance Worker*.

Avoid using *To whom it may concern*.

If you know only an initial or initials and last name of the person to whom you are writing, you can use the initials without a courtesy title; e.g., *Dear J. Thompson*, *Dear L.K. Tan*.

4. False Generics

Generics are nouns, pronouns and verbs intended to be used for both women and men. Some generics are also male-specific, which creates ambiguity and can be seen to exclude women. Male-specific generics, or false generics, can call up primarily male images for readers and listeners. Their continued use, therefore, is incompatible with gender-inclusive language. The following discussion will provide you with an understanding of how these false generics came into use and how you can eliminate them from your writing and conversation.

- **Man**

Originally, *man* meant *human being* or *person*, but over the years it has come to be used both generically and to denote male human beings only. For many people, the generic use of *man* results in ambiguity. Does the writer or speaker mean men only, or are women included as well? You can avoid this confusion

by using gender-inclusive generics, thus ensuring that women are included and represented fairly in your writing and conversation. Where men or women only are intended it is acceptable to use the gender specific terms.

Below is a list of common false generics and some suggested alternatives. This list is intended as a guide; it is not exhaustive. For more detailed suggestions, consult *The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage* by Rosalie Maggio (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991). Remember that many words that include the word man like, manage, mandate, manuscript and mandolin are not false generics. This guide suggests alternatives only to those words or phrases that obviously exclude women.

Instead of :	Use:
businessman	businessperson (businessman and businesswoman may be appropriate if used in a balanced way)
clergyman, priest	cleric (or be specific, e.g., preacher, bishop)
councilman	councilor
draftsman	drafter; draftsperson
early man, primitive man	early peoples; primitive humans
fireman	firefighter
fisherman	fisher; angler;
foreman	supervisor; chief; lead or head supervisor
handyman	caretaker; repairer
mailman	post deliverer; letter carrier
man	human beings; people; individuals
man (verb)	staff; operate; serve at/on
man-days/hours	worker-days/hours
mankind	humankind; human beings; people; individuals
man-made	synthetic; artificial; handmade
manpower	staff; employees; human resources; personnel
middleman	go-between; intermediary; facilitator
mother tongue	first language
newspaperman	reporter; journalist (or be specific, e.g., columnist)
policeman	police officer (policeman and policewoman)
repairman	repairer; technician
salesman	sales clerk; sales representative; salesperson
spokesman	spokesperson; representative
sportsman	athlete; sports lover; sports enthusiast
steward/stewardess	flight attendant, flight crew
tradesman	tradesperson
watchman	security guard
workman	worker
housegirl	cleaner, housekeeper

- **Chairman/Chair**

Chairman probably generates more discussion than any other gender-specific word. The two most commonly used alternatives are *chair* and *chairperson*.

Remember that if *chair* does not seem right to you, there are other alternatives to *chairman* you might consider, such as *convener*, *coordinator*, *moderator*.

- **He, His and Him**

The English language has no sex-indefinite, third-person pronoun that can be used to describe persons of unspecified gender, so up until recently it was considered grammatically correct to use the pronouns *he*, *his* and *him* when referring to singular antecedents of unspecified gender.

For example, we were taught that the sentence *Every employee will receive his registration form in February* or, *Each student must meet with his advisor*, was grammatically correct even when we were referring to employees or students of both sexes. Current literature on English language usage strongly discourages the use of *he*, *him* and *his* as generic terms, but some people feel that the alternative to the false generic *he* produce clumsy, unclear writing. This need not be the case. You can write well and avoid gender-exclusive language. Referring back to the example above, you can say *Employees will receive their registration forms in February*. Some alternatives to *he*, *his* and *him* are more appropriate in certain situations than others. Your choice will depend on a number of factors, such as the tone you wish to adopt and the audience you are addressing.

Just remember two things:

Avoid alternating between false generic *she* and false generic *he*. Do not use *she* in one paragraph, *he* in the next, and so on. This is confusing to your audience.

Do not use *he* with a disclaimer to indicate that even though you are using the male pronoun, you intend it to include women as well. This technique is illogical and can cause offense. There are many other effective alternatives to "generic" *he*.

Keep in mind that your goal is to express yourself as clearly as possible. The following suggestions and examples may help clarify options for gender inclusive language use.

- **Use the plural**

Rewriting a sentence in the plural is often the best choice.

Instead of: Each office manager should ensure that he attends the meeting.

Use: Office managers should ensure that they attend the meeting.

- **Eliminate personal pronouns**

Another useful technique is to eliminate gender-specific personal pronouns altogether.

Some sentences can be rewritten easily:

Instead of: Each applicant must submit his resume.

Use: Each applicant must submit a resume.

Others might need to be restructured:

Instead of: A social worker must provide good service to his clients if he wants to make a difference.

Use: A social worker who wants to make a difference must provide good client service.

- **Use *she or he/he or she***

She or he (or *he or she*) has long been an acceptable substitute for false generic *he*. Some people use it specifically to draw attention to the fact that they are including both women and men; e.g., *Each applicant must submit his or her resume*.

Used sparingly, *he* or *she* and *she* or *he* are very helpful solutions. However, repeating them frequently throughout a passage will alienate even the most dedicated reader. Avoid using *s/he* or *(s)he* or any of their variants. Although these forms provide a quick solution, most readers find them awkward or interruptive.

➤ **Use *you/your***

In some cases, you can avoid using *he* by addressing the reader directly. This is a particularly good alternative when explaining how to do something.

Instead of: Each driver must be sure to renew his automobile insurance yearly.

Use: Be sure to renew your automobile insurance yearly.

➤ **Use *one***

You can sometimes use *one* in place of a third-person pronoun. Bear in mind that this word choice will change the tone of your writing, making it more formal.

Instead of: A director should require an estimate before he agrees to hire a consultant.

Use: As a director, one should require an estimate before hiring a consultant.

➤ **Use a gender-inclusive synonym**

Try using a gender-inclusive synonym instead of the false generic *he*.

Instead of: Every government ministry has a deputy minister. He is responsible for the overall administration of the ministry.

Use: Every government ministry has a deputy minister. This person is responsible for the overall administration of the ministry.

➤ **Rewrite the sentence**

If all else fails, rewrite the sentence to eliminate false generic *he*.

Instead of: When an editor revises a document, he usually marks changes in red.

Use: When revising a document, an editor usually marks changes in red. -or- An editor revising a document usually marks changes in red.

5. Non-Written Materials

Audio and visual materials are powerful communication tools that influence perceptions and attitudes. As a result of its gender policy, the Forum Secretariat is committed to portraying men and women equitably and fairly. The principles underlying gender-inclusive guidelines for written and oral communications apply to audio and visual materials as well. Women and men should be portrayed as equal partners, rather than having roles and characteristics assigned on the basis of gender. Women should be depicted as having equal opportunities, being in positions of authority, and succeeding in a wide variety of endeavors.

6. Visual Communications

While it may not be possible to have an equal number of women and men in every photograph, illustration, cartoon or video segment, it is important that the total presentation in these media be as balanced as possible. You may wish show men in roles or jobs women have traditionally held, for example, as nurses or secretaries and women in occupations such as carpentry or fishing.

Visual communications portraying men and women fairly show both as:

- equal and active participants in all aspects of life - at home, in the work place, at school, in public life and in the community;
- being of various ages and ethnic origins;
- in non-traditional and non-stereotypical roles; e.g., women in technical or financial positions, men with family responsibilities;
- in positions at all levels of authority and of comparable status;
- being successful in a variety of endeavours, e.g., career, home, education, community, public life; and

7. Audio Communications

Audio communications, whether on their own or as part of a visual presentation, should be guided by the same principles of fairness as written and visual materials. In addition, when preparing speeches, seminars and audio-visual voice-overs, remember to:

- use both men and women as interviewers, interviewees and speakers at events;
- use female voices as often as male voices in voice-overs, regardless of subject matter; and
- ensure that dialogue and style of expression convey equal status and authority when alternating between male and female voices.