

## 2.1. *How to Write Gender Neutral Prose.*

*You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass  
a literacy test!* —George W. Bush <sup>1</sup>

*If you see a train-wreck coming, you ought to be saying,  
“What are you going to do about it, Mr. Congressman,” or  
“Madam Congressman”?* —George W. Bush <sup>2</sup>

### 2.1.1. *The problem.*

Once upon a time, it was widely believed—by as much as half of the English-speaking world—that male writers and readers were the only ones who mattered. The all-inclusive “man” or “mankind” came therefore to signify *person* or *humanity* while “he” signified *any human being*, including women, as in these unrevised first drafts:

- *And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...”*
- *That’s one small step for a man, one great leap for mankind.*

Such poorly phrased statements as these are easily remedied by plugging in “humankind” or *humanity* for “man” and “mankind,” and *person* or *human being* for “a man.”

Gender-neutral prose, though a great leap forward for humanity, is a small and usually easy step for the individual writer. But *person*, *people*, *humanity*, and *humankind* are not always the best substitutes for “man” and “mankind.” It is often uninteresting to speak of so vague an entity as “a person,” and hard to speak truthfully about so diverse a class as “humanity.” You shall do better, when revising, to be more specific:

- First draft: *The Pap test, which has greatly reduced mortality from uterine cancer, is a boon to mankind.*<sup>3</sup>
- Final draft: *The Pap test has been a boon to women’s health, greatly reducing mortality from uterine cancer.*

Difficulties sometimes arise with a generic singular subject. It is no improvement to change “The man in the street wants a tax cut” to “Street people want a tax cut,” or to commit such presidential boners as this one: “When your teachers say ‘read,’ you ought to listen to her.”

<sup>4</sup>

*Solution:* be more specific: “The voters want a tax cut.” “Complete your reading assignments.”

### 2.1.2. *Subject-verb trouble.*

When perplexed by gender trouble, some writers use the plural pronouns *they, them, their, themselves*, with reference to the singular subject. This strategy, though adopted by such thoughtful rebels as Jane Austen, is not the best solution, for it substitutes a disagreement in *number* for the original inconsistency in *gender*, as in these poorly revised statements, where both versions are inconsistent:

- *A physician should write clearly when issuing his prescriptions.*
- *A physician should write clearly when issuing their prescriptions.*
- *The nurse must assess each patient. She must take his weight, temperature, and pulse.*
- *Assess each patient. Take their weight, temperature, and pulse.*
- *If a member registers after April 1, he must pay an additional fee.*
- *If a member registers after April 1, they must pay an additional fee.*
- *Someone has parked his car on my lawn.*
- *Someone has parked their car on my lawn.*
- *Everyone bought his Taylor Swift tickets on the Internet*
- *Everyone bought their Taylor Swift tickets on the Internet.*
- *To each his own.*
- *To each their own.*

Another, usually poor, choice for revision is to substitute “he or she,” “his or her,” “him or her” for the universal male:

- *Someone has parked his or her car on my lawn.*

In a moment of exasperation you may even be tempted to become a Mad Slasher or Dasher:

- *S/he has parked his-her car on my lawn.*

The use of *he or she* is often unavoidable. But there is nothing to be said for such hermaphroditic distractions as *s/he* and *him-her*. Resist the urge to slash personal pronouns.

### 2.1.3. *A gender-neutral cavalry to the rescue.*

Most gender inconsistencies are easily corrected. In many instances you may simply delete the exclusive masculine pronoun:

- *A physician should write clearly when issuing prescriptions.*
- *A nurse must take the weight, temperature, and pulse of each patient.*

- *Someone has parked on my lawn.*
- *Everyone bought Shrew tickets on the Internet.*

Or you may adopt a plural subject, retaining a plural pronoun:

- *Physicians should write their prescriptions clearly.*
- *All of the students bought their Shrew tickets on the Internet.*

Where appropriate, you may change the frame of reference:

- *We all bought our Shrew tickets on the Internet.*

Or you may adopt a plural subject followed by *who*:

- *Members who register later than April 1 must pay an additional fee.*

Or you may simply make the sentence more specific:

- *Someone with a Yugo station wagon bearing New Jersey plates has parked on my front lawn.*

It is also okay to alternate male and female pronouns if care is taken not to confuse the reader:

- *It's easy to lose money, even in a bull market. One investor may put all of his eggs in one basket. Another may invest too much of her money in high-flying tech stocks.*

A familiar phrase or cliché such as “To each his own” may resist correction. If you cannot find a suitable equivalent from proverbial lore (e.g., “Different strokes for different folks,” “You go your way, I’ll go mine”), then simply invent a fresh turn of phrase.

There is, of course, no problem with using “he” when you are actually writing of the generic male, nor with using “she” for the generic female—

- *The modern man typically worries more about his hairline than about his waistline.*
- *Everyone intending to use the women’s locker room should bring her own towel.*

#### **2.1.4. Neutralizing professional bias.**

There was a time when *freshmen, policemen, firemen, clergymen, chairmen*, were assumed to be male for the simple reason that they always *were*—and our very language helped to perpetuate that inequitable state of affairs by conditioning our beliefs, values, and expectations. Today, substitute diction is readily available, such as *first-year students, police officers, firefighters, clergy*, and *department*

*chair*. Except as required by context, do not write “male nurse,” “male secretary,” “female lawyer,” “woman doctor,” “career woman,” as if these were surprising or inappropriate career choices. Do not call a female student a “co-ed,” nor a professional assistant a “girl,” nor an unmarried woman a “spinster.” Avoid the archaic suffix, *-ess*. Though *goddess* may never fall out of fashion, either as a word or as a cultural role, “actor,” “poet” and “author” are preferable to *actress*, *poetess*, and *authoress*. For *steward* or *stewardess*, try “flight attendant.” For *waiter* or *waitress*, write “server.”

It’s not that tough to write gender-neutral prose. You just have to tinker a bit with your sentences, which is something you ought to be doing anyway.

## 2.2. **How to Write a Report.**

### 2.2.1. **Know your audience.**

Choose the most effective mode of presentation, the right pitch, and appropriate graphics to accomplish your purpose—a classroom report, a news story, a business report. Don’t waste time telling your readers what they don’t need to hear or won’t bother to read.

### 2.2.2. **Stay focused on the five Ws.**

From your collar-grabbing lead until the final word, don’t lose ever sight of the five Ws: *Who*, *What*, *When*, *Where*, and *Why*. If you don’t have all of the pertinent facts, do your homework. Be ready to answer questions or to field replies.

Especially in news reporting, resist the temptation to editorialize. Keep your opinions and witticisms, and most of your adjectives, to yourself.

### 2.2.3. **Be specific.**

Choose your details carefully. One police detective, in his incident report, states vaguely that “The suspect resisted arrest.” At trial, the defense attorney says, “An innocent, unarmed man smirked at you just before *you* slammed his face into the hood of a car and handcuffed him, and you call that *resisting arrest*?”—at which point the officer may have lost his opportunity for his version of the story to be fully considered.

A police detective in another city files an incident report providing a few salient facts and a verbatim quotation:

• *When I attempted to subdue Sven Karlsson, he whispered, “Go to hell, you fascist son of a Chihuahua bitch.” He then shouted to three other big drunken Swedes, “Hey, guys, it’s a [expletive] piñata.” He struck me*

*in the chest with a bottle of tequila, bruising three ribs. He then jumped into the swimming pool with his clothes on and dared me to dive in after him....*

That Mr. Karlsson resisted arrest will be clear to the ladies and gentlemen of the jury, not only from the policeman's courtroom recollection, but from the detailed police report, drafted within hours of the officer's bruising encounter with the defendant.

A third detective, reporting on a police raid at a suburban house of prostitution, omits nothing—tediously recording even such details as the dish of stewed prunes that sat on the table, and the number of prunes, and the approximate cost of the dish—until his audience simply loses interest.

#### 2.2.4. ***Be brief.***

If you want to get creative, write a novel. For a report, it's *Just the facts!*—but include all facts that are essential to the story. Let us see, hear, smell, feel what happened. What caused the train wreck? What is needed for the public schools in Afghanistan? Are migrant workers in your community being paid a living wage? Are Ken and Barbie losing market share to Tickle Me Elmo? Hook our interest. Tell your story. Sign off.

### 2.3. ***How to Write Email.***

#### 2.3.1. ***Write it, don't just type it.***

Email is less formal than paper-mail but that is no reason, when communicating electronically, to forget everything you know about effective writing. Begin with a personal greeting (by *name*, not: "Hi, Professor"). Construct coherent paragraphs, and close with a personal signoff. Be interesting, be organized, specific, clear, concise, and accurate. In short, try to write well even when corresponding by email.

#### 2.3.2. ***Edit your message.***

Use the subject line, if only as a matter of self-interest. Given the quantities of spam that have already glutted your addressee's *In* mailbox, your messages are more likely to be read if you identify both yourself and your subject.

Observe the conventions of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation so that readers are not distracted by errors and idiosyncrasies.

writing in lower case will not make your message sound like the free verse of e. e. cummings. it will only make you look lazy.

BUT WRITING IN ALL CAPS IS PERCEIVED AS SHOUTING,  
AND MAKES YOUR MESSAGE HARDER TO READ.

Some email programs include editing and spelling aids. Use them. Manually proofread every message at least twice before you hit the “send” button.

Never forward personal email to other readers without the writer’s permission, not even if someone has done it to you.

### 2.3.3. *Be civil.*

If you’re angry or annoyed, sleep on it for a night and proofread your message in the morning—you may want to change a few things.

Don’t be sarcastic. A horizontal smiley face may indicate that you were only trying to be funny, but a :-)) is no substitute for saying what you really mean.

The ease and easy anonymity of electronic communication have made it possible for anyone to publish anything about anybody at any time for any reason—and for that very reason cyberspace has become clogged with foul-smelling sludge from resentniks whose idea of a good time is to spew verbal abuse at or about others. “Flaming” usually says more about the flamer than about the flamed. If it makes you crazy that the world contains people whose opinion, skin color, religion, diet, or sexual orientation differs from your own, then that’s your problem, not theirs. Lay off.

When attacked—as, say, in a Usenet discussion group—resist the temptation to respond in kind. If you need to argue online, your thoughtful, pointed prose will score more points than smug vituperation. Let your adversary be defeated by his own inferior ideas and poor writing, not by your own over-the-top nastiness.

### 2.3.4. *Identity and privacy issues.*

Identify yourself in every email communication just as you do in your everyday telephone conversations. If you’re a conscientious whistle blower, or if you have any defensible reason whatsoever to conceal your identity, then exercise your right to remain anonymous, but don’t suppose your email musings are really secure from unintended readers, or your identity secure from disclosure.

Nor do Internet communications simply vanish into the Ethernet. Thanks to the ease of forwarding—which is not something that anyone should do to you, but it happens—the message you send to a friend, colleague, or stranger may eventually be read without your permission by hundreds, perhaps thousands of readers, including your professor, boss, neighbors, and your own children. If you have written well, courageously, and discreetly, that’s nothing to worry about.

### Notes to the extract

<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, *White House Press Releases* (Feb. 21, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> George W. Bush, Detroit, Mich., *Congressional Quarterly* transcript (Feb. 8 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For this splendid example I am indebted to Carolyn Jacobson, “Some Notes on Gender-Neutral Language,” online, <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/history/nongenderlang.html>, accessed Sep. 2005.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush, *White House Bulletin* (9 Feb. 2001).

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