STEPHEN YORK EDITORIAL SERVICES

Factsheet 3: Avoiding sexist and biased language

These two articles on avoiding the use of sexist and biased language appeared on my website blog in 2017 under Tips for writers. They are reproduced here as they appeared.

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AVOIDING SEXIST AND BIASED LANGUAGE: PART 1

In the first part of this blog I will discuss the occurrence and the effect of using sexist language and in part 2 I will go on to the wider issues of using stereotypes and biased language.

Meaning and occurrence

Sexist language refers to words, terms, or usages that discriminate against or exclude either of the sexes, and that assume maleness, or even femaleness is the standard.

Despite many years of feminist campaigners and attempts to raise awareness of the use of sexist language, it still widely exists in modern life. Gender-specific titles and pronouns are examples of sexism and can subtly influence our thoughts about gender roles in society and what are the occupational expectations for the sexes.

Sexist language can take several forms, including:

• When pronouns are used that denote a single sex despite the information relating equally to both sexes. For example, "Every delegate should bring his seminar plan and notes with him to each session." It is unlikely that the seminar would be attended by only males. Also, "The nurse helped her patient prepare for discharge from hospital".

• A job title sometimes relates the job to one specific sex, but the job can be performed by either sex. Examples of this are multitudinous, as in fireman, laundrywoman, postman, and shipmaster. These could be rewritten as firefighter, laundry worker, post deliverer, and ship's captain.

Reasons to avoid sexist language

• Sexist language encourages discrimination and can discourage people from pursuing their ambitions. If females are constantly told that being engineers is a man's role it may discourage them from training for such a role. The reverse applies to men in traditionally female roles such as in nurseries or midwifery.

• Sexist language also offends people and they can feel excluded. This is not an issue of the right to free speech but the right for all people to feel included.

- If sexist language is used it could automatically lead to half the audience not being receptive to your message and possibly feeling aggrieved.

How to avoid sexist language

The goal is to avoid referring to individual people as male or female, and to speak in hypothetical statements to mixed-gender groups. These are just a few tips:

- Use genderless titles whenever possible, such as flight attendant instead of stewardess and homemaker instead of housewife.

- Avoid adding gender markers to genderless titles, such as male nurse instead of nurse.

- Use humanity or the human race instead of man or mankind if you are referring to all people.

- In referring to a single hypothetical individual, use person instead of man, for example business person / business manager / business executive, not businessman or businesswoman.

- Rework sentences to the plural and use a plural pronoun to avoid gendered pronouns and possessive adjectives. This will create more grammatically correct writing than using a plural pronoun with a singular subject.

  Sexist version: "Each teacher makes up his own schedule."

  Non-sexist and grammatically incorrect: "Each teacher makes up their own schedule."

  Non-sexist and grammatically correct: "Teachers make up their own schedules."

- When it is not possible to recast sentences in the plural, use he or she or his or her so as to be inclusive. ("The winner must claim his or her prize by the end of the month.") However, using this method too frequently can break up the flow of your writing, so use it infrequently.

- Think of ways to avoid using personal pronouns such as he, she, his or her. For example. One way is to use an article, such as "a", "an", or "the".

Note: Do not take gender-inclusivity to extremes; every individual has a gender and can be referred to in that way. Also, some biological facts apply only to women or only to men. For instance, if you are writing an article on childbirth, you would not refer to "a pregnant man or woman".

AVOIDING SEXIST AND BIASED LANGUAGE: PART 2

In the first part of this blog I discussed the widespread use of sexist language and reasons and methods used to avoid it. Here I will look at biased language and stereotypes.

What is biased language?

Biased language refers to words and phrases that can be considered hurtful, offensive, and prejudiced. Biased language includes expressions or terms that demean or exclude people because of age, ethnicity, marital status, race, religion, politics, sex, sexual orientation, social class, or certain physical or mental traits.

Examples of biased treatment

Age: Avoid derogatory or condescending terms associated with age. For example, "a little old lady" can be rephrased as "a woman in her eighties". Also try to avoid phrases such as "old dears" or, even worse, "he was an old codger".

Nationality / country: Avoid stereotyping people according to where they come from. Not all British people are stiff and formal, giving the impression of reserve or unfriendliness. Not all Americans carry cameras, nor French people wear berets, if indeed many do.

Be careful in the way you refer to countries and continents.

- The Americas include both North and South America, so you need to make the distinction.

- England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland make up Great Britain, or the United Kingdom.

- Shifts in world politics and boundaries have resulted in many countries being renamed: Burma has become Myanmar; Ceylon has become Sri Lanka; Rhodesia is now Zimbabwe. Ensure you use an up-to-date world atlas.

Health and disabilities: Avoid terms like wheelchair-bound and victim (of a disease), so as not to emphasize difference and disability. Refer instead to someone who uses a wheelchair and do not draw unnecessary attention to a disability or an illness.

Race: A person's race should only be mentioned when it is relevant and use the names people prefer for their racial or ethnic affiliation. For example: black and African American are preferred terms as are Native American (not American Indian) and Asian (not Oriental).

Sexual orientation: As with race, refer to a person's sexual orientation only if the information is necessary to your writing. It may be pertinent to say that someone was defended by a homosexual in a legal case of discrimination against homosexuals, but it would not be relevant mentioning this in a criminal or commercial legal case. You will not necessarily know your reader's sexual orientation and it is therefore unwise to make assumptions and risk causing offence.

Other watchwords

The word normal: A word to be especially careful about using when referring to your own or someone else's health, ability, or sexual orientation. After all, what is normal? Some readers could justifiably find that offensive.

Similar care should be taken with words that have religious connotations such as devout or fundamentalist, or political connotations such as radical, moderate, or right wing.

Finally

It is not only terms used in writing that can cause offence. Drawing cartoons that belittle someone because of their beliefs, gender expression, or political affiliation can also be hurtful. Recall the problems caused by a Danish newspaper some years ago and a French magazine more recently that published cartoons that were interpreted by Muslims as disrespectful to their faith.

The motto: Treat others as you would want them to treat you – with respect. Careless or gratuitously offensive writing is not clever.