

Gender-Fair Language and Gender Inclusive Pronouns

Our understanding of gender and gender identity has evolved. In the writing program, we recognize that language doesn't just allow us to express ourselves; it structures what we think. Part of our commitment to a respectful and equitable classroom includes understanding that everyone has a right to a preferred pronoun such as she, he, sie, xe, hir. Your teacher may ask you for your preferred pronoun ("What pronouns do you use?") and your classmates may request specific usage ("My name is Christy, and my pronouns are she and her"). While you are under no obligation to explain your preferences to your peers or your teacher, you should be aware that it is your right to request certain usage.

The words we use often reinforce implicit and unconscious assumptions about gender roles, silencing and discriminating against certain groups in the class. Gender-fair language is committed to opening rather than closing opportunities for speakers and writers; it aims for inclusion. Using gender fair language is consistent with the overall goals of first-year writing, as its use affirms the importance of writers taking control of their communications and recognizes the power of language in our lives. All first-year students should strive to incorporate gender-fair language into both their writing and speaking. Strategies for doing so include:

1. Balancing pronoun use: It is important to balance usage of the pronoun, "he," with "she" or use "s/he" or "she/he" to indicate inclusivity ("If a student studies hard, s/he will succeed" instead of "If a student studies hard, he will succeed"). Alternately, a writer can pluralize the noun to which the pronoun refers ("Students who study hard will succeed").

2. Avoiding gender-specific vocabulary when possible: It is important to avoid words like "mankind" and phrases like "best man for the job," "freshman" and "man the controls" when inclusionary alternatives like "humanity," "best person for the job," "first-year" and "take charge of," which do not alter meaning, can be easily substituted.

3. Avoiding stereotypical gendered characteristics: It is important not to imply in your speaking or writing certain stereotypes associated with gender, for instance, that boys are brave and girls are timid; that women are passive and men active; or that women are admired for the physical attributes and men for their achievements. In addition to being discriminatory, this kind of clichéd writing negates originality and unique, thoughtful ideas.

It is also important to create an atmosphere in the classroom that is inviting to all and allows for all voices to be heard. Comments that stereotype or discriminate against males or females should be avoided. Teachers and students should praise and respond to contributions made by both males and females as well as avoid interrupting others, both male and female, when speaking in class.

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Adapted from Shepherd University's *Writing Program Handbook*.