Gendered Nouns and Pronouns: A User's Guide

Talented writers are, among other things, ethical writers. Writing ethically begins with the understanding that language is not simply a passive tool for communication, but rather a normative practice, rooted in human conventions that actively shape our perceptions of the world. Rules of grammar and syntax are mostly, if not entirely, matters of convention, as are the meanings of words themselves, and there is nothing wrong with that – conventions are necessary for communication. But linguistic conventions can also age poorly, reflecting values that much of the world has abandoned. When this happens – as is clearly the case with certain gendered usages – writing ethically means thinking carefully about the conventions you wish to retain and those you would rather adapt or defy.

In making these choices, it is important to remember that we are unlikely to agree in many places. A certain amount of toleration is called for in any linguistic community, and particularly one in which students are actively testing their own ideas. Writing ethically does not mean obeying a new, more "correct" code. It does, however, mean paying attention to gender and other ethically-charged linguistic issues, and facing them squarely and consciously. It also means being prepared to employ a bit of extra creativity. Ethical solutions can sometimes constrain prose in ways, but that's no excuse for complacency about basic matters of grammar, style, or logical coherence. With a little work, ethical commitments can coexist peacefully with elegant prose.

With these principles in mind, the following guide explores three gender-related usages that commonly arise in writing, in hopes of helping writers navigate them thoughtfully and gracefully.

1. The universal "man"

EXAMPLES: *"The conquest of space is one of man's highest ambitions."*

"Men have long sought to understand the philosophy of Kant."

THE PROBLEM:

a) Sentences like these assume either that only men have such goals, or that a clearly masculine word can nonetheless adequately represent more than one gender.
b) The default use of masculine terminology is no accident culturally. It arguably both reflects and reinforces a sexist value system in which unspecified persons of importance are presumed to be men.

CURRENT STATUS:

Though once commonly accepted, such usages are now widely considered sexist and have become passé – so much so, in fact, that they often signal a reactionary or confrontational attitude in an author that will put many readers on edge, especially in academic writing. If that's not your intention, avoid them.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS:

Try a more general, non-gendered noun, such as "person," "people," "human," or "humanity." These are not only more appropriate in most cases, but also technically more accurate. As you make these substitutions, pay attention to how they affect the naturalness of your prose. For example, it doesn't really work to say, "The conquest of space is one of humans' highest ambitions." The possessive is awkward, and some uses of "human" make you sound like you're observing us from another planet. But you might say, "The conquest of space is among the highest of human ambitions."

More specific nouns can also work in many cases. For example, in the second case above, you might suggest that "readers…," "philosophers…," or "scholars … have long sought to understand the philosophy of Kant." Just notice: there are lots of perfectly natural solutions that allow you to avoid referencing gender at all.

2. Other Needlessly Gendered Nouns

EXAMPLES:

fireman, freshman, mailman, stewardess, actress

THE PROBLEM:

There are multiple ethical concerns here:

a) In many cases, these nouns incorporate the universal "man," retaining all the problems listed above. Words like "fireman" and "freshman" imply either that only men fight fires or attend college, or that a clearly masculine term can represent more than one gender. More generally, the default specifically to male terminology both reflects and reinforces sexist cultural attitudes.
b) Gendered occupational terms like "fireman" and "mailman" also arguably perpetuate the idea that certain kinds of work are better or uniquely suited for men. These terms influence cultural attitudes and expectations in ways that could limit career opportunities for women and transgendered persons.

c) Although words like "stewardess" and "actress" appear to have equivalent male terms, the "-ess" ending may carry diminutive implications, suggesting that an actress is a lesser or incomplete version of an actor, rather than an equivalent.

d) Binary pairs of terms like "actor" and "actress" can also be alienating to transgendered persons who do not readily identify with male or female categories.

CURRENT STATUS:

Some of these terms are more taboo than others, but linguistic gender norms are changing quickly, and it may not be long before all are out of favor in mainstream writing and speech. For example, "steward" and "stewardess" are generally passé; both terms have been replaced in common usage by the more general term "flight attendant." "Actor" and "actress" remain much more common, but non-gendered uses of "actor" have been growing in popularity. For example, in 2017, the MTV movie awards (not exactly our ethical gold standard, but perhaps a useful barometer) stopped giving separate acting awards for male and female performances, and gave the combined "best actor" award to Emma Watson.

Some writers perhaps inadvertently retain gendered terms (like "mailman") for men and more general terms (like "mail carrier") for women (since "mailman" still sounds more natural than "mailwoman"). But both ethically and stylistically, this inconsistency seems hard to defend.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS:

Firefighter, first-year student, mail carrier, flight attendant, actor

3. Gendered Pronouns

EXAMPLES:

He, him, his, she, her, hers

A person should always do what he thinks is right.

A person should always do what he or she thinks is right.

PROBLEMS:

Two major concerns arise:

a) The general use of male pronouns for persons of unspecified gender (as in the first sample sentence above) shares most of the problems of the universal "man," listed above.
b) All six pronouns listed above (and the second sample sentence) contribute to binary thinking about gender that can alienate and exclude transgendered persons.

CURRENT STATUS:

This is a tough one – the appropriate use of gendered pronouns is very much a matter of ongoing debate. A few matters are pretty well settled, however. Above all, the use of a generic "he," though common in older writing, is now widely out of favor; like the use of the universal "man," it may unintentionally signal a reactionary or confrontational attitude to your reader.

More recently, many writers have resolved these concerns by incorporating female pronouns into their writing (e.g. "she or he," "his or her"), but this approach has become newly controversial – especially in academic writing – because of its failure to include transgendered persons. As a result, the use of "they" as a singular pronoun has become increasingly popular, to such an extent that it has been accepted in limited cases by the *Washington Post* and the Associated Press, though the Chicago Manual of Style still considers it "ungrammatical." The reasonable concern that constrains this usage is that a pronoun should agree not only in gender, but also in number, with its antecedent term. Using "they" as a pronoun for "person" is fairly common in colloquial speech, and as many commentators have noted, it can be found throughout the history of literature. But it can also introduce significant confusion into your writing. Consider the following example:

> *"Two friends were walking home when they remembered they'd left their phone at the restaurant. So they went back for it while they went home."*

It is easy to overdramatize such concerns. Using "they" as a singular noun will not cause the English language to collapse into senselessness and anarchy. In most cases, it is possible to find a workaround; here, for example, the second sentence can be fixed by using proper names, or simply by saying, "So one of them went back for it while the other went home." The first sentence is trickier, however, because we still don't know whether the phone belonged to one or both of the friends, or which of them remembered it was left behind. As much as we like the singular "they" as an ethical solution, it is less than ideal grammatically.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS:

1) Where possible, switch a sentence to the plural, as in "People should always do what they think is right." This won't work everywhere, but it is frequently the

most inconspicuous and natural way to resolve a concern about gendered pronouns.

2) Restructuring your sentence to avoid the need for a pronoun at all. For example, "A person should always seek to do the right thing." With a little creativity, a workaround of this sort can often improve your writing and keep your reader's attention on your point, not on your pronouns.

3) Using "they" as a singular pronoun, as in "A person should always do what they think is right." As noted above, this practice is not universally accepted, and even where it is, there are good reasons to use it sparingly. But it does seem to be emerging as a consensus among serious people.

4) Using entirely new, non-gendered pronouns, such as "zie," "zim," and "zir,"; "xe," "xem," and "xyr"; "per" and "pers"; or "thon" and "thons." For example, "A person should always do what zie thinks is right," or "A person should always think for thonself." These and other new coinages have been promoted by many LGBTQ advocates, and they do appear to resolve the primary ethical concerns. They are not commonly used in mainstream or academic writing, however, partly because no clear consensus has emerged as to which set of new pronouns to use, and partly because their use calls such attention to a part of speech many writers prefer to use less conspicuously. It remains to be seen whether these concerns will be resolved with broader usage over time. In the meantime, the options above remain more prevalent.