

# **FOR NONSEXIST USE OF LANGUAGE**

## **IN NCTE PUBLICATIONS (REVISED, 1985)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the 1971 Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Las Vegas, Nevada, the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors approved the formation of an NCTE Committee on the Role and Image of Women in the Council and the Profession. As the result of a resolution passed by the members of NCTE at the 1974 Annual Convention, one on the committee's responsibilities was to assist in setting guidelines for nonsexist\* use of language in NCTE publications.

Suggestions were elicited from editors of Council journals and from professional staff members at NCTE, as well as from members of the Women's Committee. Copies of the guidelines also went to all members of the Board of Directors. At the 1975 Annual Convention, the Board of Directors adopted a formal policy statement that read in part: "The National Council of Teachers of English should encourage the use of nonsexist language, particularly through its publications and periodicals."

Ten years have passed since these guidelines were created, and although diminished. Because language plays a central role in the way human beings think and behave, we still need to promote language that opens rather than closes possibilities for women and men. Whether teaching in the classroom, assigning texts, determining curriculum, serving on national committees, or writing in professional publications, NCTE members directly and indirectly influence thought and behavior.

As an educational publisher, NCTE is not alone in its concern for fair treatment of men and women. The role of education is to make choices available, not to limit opportunities. Censorship removes possibilities; these guidelines extend what is available by offering alternatives to traditional usage and to editorial choices that restrict meaning.

### **LANGUAGE**

This section deals primarily with word choice. Many of the examples are matters of vocabulary; a few are matters of grammatical choice. The vocabulary items are relatively easy to deal with, since the English lexicon has a history of rapid change. Grammar is a more difficult area, and we have chosen to use alternatives that already exist in the language rather than to invent new constructions. In both cases, recommended alternatives have been determined by what is graceful and unobtrusive. The purpose of these changes is to suggest alternative styles:

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\*Although *nonsexist* is the word traditionally used to describe such language, other terms have come into common use, namely, *gender-neutral*, *sex-fair*, *gender-free*.

### Generic “Man”

1. Since the word *man* has come to refer almost exclusively to adult males, it is sometimes difficult to recognize its genetic meaning.

#### Problems

mankind  
man’s achievements  
the best man for the job  
the common man  
cavemen

#### Alternatives

humanity, human beings, people\*  
human achievements  
the best person for the job  
the average person, ordinary people  
cave dwellers, prehistoric people

2. Sometimes the combining form *-woman* is used alongside *-man* in occupational terms and job titles, but we prefer using the same titles for men and women when naming jobs that could be held by both. Note, too, that using the same forms for men and women is a way to avoid using the combining form *-person* as a substitute for *-women* only.

#### Problems

chairman/chairwoman  
  
businessman/businesswoman  
congressman/congresswoman  
policeman/policewoman  
salesman/saleswoman  
  
fireman  
mailman

#### Alternatives

chair, coordinator (of a committee of department), moderator (of a meeting), presiding officer, head, chairperson  
business executive, manager  
congressional representative  
police officer  
sales clerk, sales representative, salesperson  
fire fighter  
letter carrier

### Generic “He” and “His”

Because there is no one pronoun in English that can be effectively substituted for *he* or *his*, we offer several alternatives. The form *he* or *she* has been the NCTE house style over the last ten years, on the premise that it is less distracting than *she* or *he* or *he/she*. There are other choices, however. The one you make will depend on what you are writing.

1. Sometimes it is possible to drop the possessive form *his* altogether or to substitute an article.

#### Problems

The average student is worried about his grades.  
When the student hands in his paper, read it immediately.

#### Alternatives

The average student is worried about grades.  
When the student hands in the paper, read it immediately.

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\*A one-word substitution for *mankind* isn’t possible, especially in set phrases like the story of *mankind*. Sometimes recasting the sentence altogether may be the best solution.

2. Often, it makes sense to use the plural instead of the singular.

Problems

Give the student his grade right away.  
Ask the student to hand in his work as soon as he is finished.

Alternatives

Give the students their grades right away.  
Ask students to hand in their work as soon as they are finished.

3. The first or second person can sometimes be substituted for the third person.

Problems

As a teacher, he is faced daily with the problem of paperwork.  
When a teacher asks his students for an evaluation, he is putting himself on the spot.

Alternatives

As teachers, we are faced daily with the problem of paperwork.  
When you ask your students for an evaluation, you are putting yourself on the spot.

4. In some situations, the pronoun *one* (*one's*) can be substituted for *he* (*his*), but it should be used sparingly. Notice that the use of *one*—like the use of *we* or *you*—changes the tone of what you are writing.

Problems

He might well wonder what his response should be.

Alternatives

One might will wonder what one's response should be.

5. A sentence with *he* or *his* can sometimes be recast in the passive voice or another impersonal reconstruction.

Problems

Each student should hand in paper promptly.  
He found such an idea intolerable.

Alternatives

Papers should be handed in promptly.  
Such an idea was intolerable.

6. When the subject is an indefinite pronoun, the plural form *their* can occasionally be used with it, especially when the referent for the pronoun is clearly understood to be plural.

Problems

When everyone contributes his own ideas, the discussion will be a success.

Alternatives

When everyone contributes their own ideas, the discussion will be a success.

But since this usage is transitional, it is usually better to recast the sentence and avoid the indefinite pronoun.

Problems

When everyone contributes his own ideas, the discussion will be a success.

Alternatives

When all the students contribute their own ideas, the discussion will be a success.

7. Finally, sparing use can be made of *he* or *she* and *his* or *her*. It is best to restrict this choice to contexts in which the pronouns are not repeated.

Problems

Each student will do better is he has a voice in the decision.  
Each student can select his own topic.

Alternatives

Each student will do better is he or she has a voice in the decision.  
Each student can select his or her own topic.

Sex-Role Stereotyping

Word choices sometimes reflect unfortunate and unconscious assumptions about sex roles—for example, that farmers are always men and elementary school teachers are always women; that men are valued for their accomplishments and women for their physical attributes; or that men are strong and brave while women are weak and timid. We need to examine the assumption inherent in certain stock phrases and choose nonstereotyped alternatives.

1. Identify men and women in the same way. Diminutive or special forms to name women are usually unnecessary. In most cases, generic terms such as doctor or actor should be assumed to include both men and women. Only occasionally are alternate forms needed, and in these cases, the alternate form replaces both the masculine and the feminine titles.

Problems

stewardess  
  
authoress  
waitress  
poetess  
coed  
lady lawyer  
male nurse

Alternatives

flight attendant (for both steward and stewardess)  
  
author  
server, food server  
poet  
student  
lawyer . . . she  
nurse . . . he

2. Do not represent women as occupying only certain jobs or roles and men as occupying only certain others.

Problems

the kindergarten teacher . . . she  
  
the principal . . . he  
  
Have your mother send a snack for the party.

Alternatives

*occasionally* use the kindergarten teacher . . . he  
*or* kindergarten teachers . . . they  
*occasionally* use the principal . . . she  
*or* principals . . . they  
Have a parent send a snack for the party.  
*occasionally* use Have your father . . .  
*or* Have your parents . . .

NCTE conventiongoers and their wives and children.  
Writers become so involved in their work that they neglect their wives and children.

NCTE conventiongoers and their spouses are invited.  
Writers become so involved in their work that they neglect their families.

3. Treat men and women in a parallel manner.

Problems

The class interviewed Chief Justice Burger and Mrs. O'Connor.

The reading list included Proust, Joyce, Gide, and Virginia Woolf.

Both Bill Smith, a straight-A sophomore, and Kathy Ryan, a pert junior, won writing awards.

Alternatives

The class interviewed Warren Burger and Sandra O'Connor.  
*or . . . Mr. Burger and Ms. O'Connor.*  
*or . . . Chief Justice Burger and Justice O'Connor.*

The reading list included Proust, Joyce, Gide, and Woolf.

*or . . . Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf.*

Both sophomore Bill Smith, a straight-A student, and junior Kathy Ryan, editor of the school paper, won writing awards.

4. Seek alternatives to language that patronizes or trivializes women, as well as to language that reinforces stereotypes images of both women and men

Problems

The president of the company hired a gal Friday.

I'll have my girl do it.

Stella is a career woman.

The ladies on the committee all supported the bill.

Pam had lunch with the girls from the office.

This is a man-sized job.

That's just an old wives' tale.

Don't be such an old lady.

Alternatives

The president of the company hired an assistant.

I'll have my secretary to do it.

Stella is a professional.

*or Stella is a doctor (architect, etc.)*

The women on the committee all supported the bill.

Pam had lunch with the women from the office.

This is a big (huge, enormous) job.

That's just a superstition (superstitious story).

Don't be so fussy.

Sexist Language in a Direct Quotation

Quotations cannot be altered, but there are other ways of dealing with this problem.

1. Avoid the quotation altogether if it is not really necessary.
2. Paraphrase the quotation, giving the original author credit for the idea.

3. If the quotation is fairly short, recast it as an indirect quotation, substituting nonsexist words as necessary.

Problems

Among the questions asked by the school representatives was the following:  
“Considering the ideal college graduate, what degree of knowledge would you prefer him to have in each of the curricular areas?”

Alternatives

Among the questions asked by the school representatives was on about what degree of knowledge the ideal college graduate should have in each of the curricular areas.

Sample Revised Passage

Substantial revisions or deletions are sometimes necessary when problems overlap or when stereotyped assumptions about men and women so pervade a passage that simple replacement of words is inadequate.

Problems

Each student who entered the classroom to find himself at the mercy of an elitist, Vassar-trained Miss Fidditch could tell right away that the semester would be a trial. The trend in composition pedagogy toward student-centered essays and away from hours of drill on grammatical correctness has meant, at least of him, that he can finally learn to write. But Macrorie, Elbow, and Janet Emig could drive the exasperated teacher of a cute and perky cheerleader type to embrace the impersonal truth of whom as direct object rather than fight his way against the undertow of a gush of personal experience. As Somerset Maugham remarked, “Good prose should resemble the conversation of a well-bred man,” and both Miss Fidditch and the bearded guru who wants to “get inside your head” must realize it.

Alternatives

The trend in composition pedagogy toward student-centered essays, represented by such writers as Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, and Janet Emig, has meant that some students are finally learning to write. Yet the movement away from hours of drill on grammatical correctness has brought with it a new problem: in the hands of the inexperienced teacher, student essays can remain little more than unedited piles of personal experiences and emotions.

## REPRESENTATION OF MAN AND WOMAN

Important as language is, striving for nonsexist usage is to little purpose if the underlying assumptions about men and women continue to restrict them to traditional rules. If women never enter an author’s world, for example, it little avails a writer or editor to refer scrupulously to

students as “they” and prehistoric people as “cave dwellers.” Thus, teachers and other professionals must be alert to the possible sexist implication of the content as well as the language of educational materials.

It has been enheartening to note that in the last ten years, trade publishers, textbook publishers, and publishers of reference works have become acutely aware of sexist language, thus largely alleviating the problem of discriminatory reference. Still, vigilance must be exercised.

The following recommendations concerning educational materials are made to correct traditional omissions of women or perpetuations of stereotypes.

### Booklists

1. Items for a booklist should be chosen to emphasize the equality of men and women and to show them in nontraditional as well as traditional roles. Many children’s favorites and classics may contain sexist elements, but books that are valuable for other reasons should not be excluded. The annotations, however, should be written in nonsexist language.
2. Picture books should be chosen showing males and females actively participating in a variety of situations at home, work, and play.
3. Booklists should be organized by subject headings that do not assume stereotyped male and female interests.

#### Problems

Books for Boys  
Books for Girls

#### Alternatives

Arts and Crafts  
Sports  
Travel

### Teaching Units

1. The topic and organization of teaching units should be carefully considered to avoid sexist implications. Literature by and about both women and men should be included wherever possible.
2. When materials are chosen that present stereotyped assumptions about men and women, they should be balanced by others that show nontraditional roles and assumptions. Jemima Puddle-Duck and Peter Rabbit read together, for instance, show foolishness is not a sex-linked characteristic. Vera Brittain’s *A Testament of Youth* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* present the aftermath of World War I from provocative perspectives. Placing a book in the proper historical context and using discussion questions that reflect an awareness of the sexist elements are good strategies.
3. Activities suggested in teaching units should not be segregated by sex: boys can make costumes and girls can build sets.

### Reference Books and research Materials

Reference books can be implicitly sexist in their titles, organizations, content, and language. Editors of such books should follow the suggestions in this publication to ensure nonsexist language in bibliographies, indexes, style manuals, and teacher's guides. In research works, if both males and females were studied, references to individual subjects should not assume that they are all one sex.

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF GUIDELINES**

These guidelines for nonsexist language are suggestions for teachers, writers, and contributors to NCTE publications. For the editors of NCTE publications, however, they are a statement of editorial policy.

Traditionally, editors have set the style for their publications—deciding, for example, whether they should be a comma before the conjunction in a series or whether the first item in list after a colon should begin with a capital letter. Style decisions have sometimes been made in response to public pressure. Writing Negro with a capital letter instead of a lowercase letter and, later, using Black instead of both style Negro were decisions of this sort for many publishing houses, newspapers, and magazines.

It is an editor's job to rewrite whenever necessary to eliminate awkward language, inconsistency, or inaccuracy. If a job title is actually identified in an article as Director of Public Instruction but the title is actually Supervisor of Public Instruction, the Editor changes the wording as a matter of course and without asking the author's approval. If the subject matter or tone of an article is totally inappropriate for the particular publication, it would also be the editor's prerogative to return the manuscript to the author. In the case of language inconsistent with the guidelines, it is the editor's duty to question the author's use of particular term; on the other hand, the author has the right to insist on its use, but a footnote will be provided to reflect such insistence.

The choices suggested in these guidelines are intended as additions to the style sheets and manuals already in use.

### **REFERENCES**

Authors and editors who would like to see further suggestions for creating a graceful, nondiscriminatory writing style should refer to these publications. (Note that many of the publishers' guidelines are in the process of being revised.)

American Psychological Association Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education. "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language." *American Psychologist* 30 (June 1975): 682-84.

*Editorial and Art Content Criteria for Treatment of Minorities and Women*. Lexington: Ginn and Company. (Available from the publisher, 191 Spring Street, Lexington, MA 02173.)

*Fairness in Educational Materials: Exploring the Issues.* Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc. (Available from the publisher, 155 North Wacker Drive, Chicago, IL 60606.)

*Guidelines for Bias-Free Publishing.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company. (Available from the publisher's distribution center, Princeton Road, Hightstown, NJ 08520.)

*Guidelines for Creating Positive Sexual and Racial Images in Educational Materials.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1975. (Available in limited quantities from the publisher, 866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022.)

*Guidelines for Developing Bias-Free Instructional Materials.* Morristown: Silver Burdett Company, 1979. (Available from the publisher, 250 James Street, Morristown, NJ 07960.)

*Guidelines for the Development of Elementary and Secondary Instructional Materials.* New York: Holt, Rineholt and Winston School Department, 1975. (Available from the publisher, 383 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10017.)

Miller, Casey, and Kate Swift. *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: For Writers, Editors and Speakers.* New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980. (Available from Harper and Row, 10 East 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, New York, NY 10022.)

Neilsen, Alleen Pace. "Editing for Sex." *Idaho English Journal* 6 (Spring 1983): 12+.

---. "Writing the great *He/She* Battle." *College English* 46 (February 1984): 151.

*Statement on Bias-Free Materials.* New York: Association of American Publishers. (Available from AAP, One Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016.)

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