

Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language

Created by: HR Unit

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Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language

1. Introduction

IBEC is committed to justice and to the avoidance of discrimination in all its fields of competence. Language plays a critical role in how we interpret the world, including how we think and behave. Word choices often reflect unconscious assumptions about values, gender roles and the abilities of women and men. Gendered language is still commonplace in both the workplace and everyday life.

IBEC's "Equal opportunities & Diversity management Plan (2014-2017)" underlines our commitment to advancing in gender equality and women empowerment. For that reason, one of the actions to be implemented is to prepare and communicate to IBECs community a guide on gender-neutral language.

This document is intended to be used as a guide which contains information about gender-inclusive language and advice on how to eliminate gender bias from our written and spoken communications. Gender-inclusive language addresses and includes women and men. As well as being a sign of equal treatment and respect, it also means for such treatment and respect. Finally, this guide will help us ensure clarity and help us say what we mean.

If people everywhere show greater sensitivity to the implications of the language they use, a higher degree of precision will result. It should be remembered that imprecise word choices may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning, even if they are not intended to be. Such language hinders efforts to increase women's empowerment, and is not in accordance with IBEC goals.

This guide aims to:

- Help readers identify sexist language
- Provide guidance for inclusive language in oral and written communications

2. Contents

The following contents discuss how we can avoid language that discriminates women. Some forms of this discrimination are obvious and need little explanation, others are more subtle. But all forms of discriminatory language contribute to attitudes that reinforce barriers – both visible and invisible – to the full and equal participation of women in society and in the workforce.

The following examples show how with some rephrasing and careful attention to meaning, it is usually possible to improve the level of accuracy while avoiding giving offence. Where both sexes are meant, it is always preferable to use a term which includes, or at least does not exclude, women.

2.1 Equal treatment and respect for women

Women participate everywhere in our society. Language, the basic tool of communication, is changing to reflect this participation. However, sexual stereotypes, demeaning references and



words that exclude women are still found in everyday speech and in workplace communications. Such language is incompatible with the goal of gender equality.

To be truly equal, women must be seen and heard to be equal. Some language reflects a lack of respect for women that serves to trivialize or demean their accomplishments. This language also creates stereotypes that can confuse, offend and alienate your audience and your co-workers. By eliminating this kind of language, the gender-inclusive language policy will help IBEC lead the way to gender equality throughout our workforce.

Gender addresses:

The term *girl* is never appropriate in the workplace, unless you are referring to a minor, or a child.

Addressing women by their marital status is an old practice. While the address ‘Mrs.’ implies that the woman is married, ‘Ms.’ emerged as an alternative to ‘Mrs.’. Today, the ‘Ms.’ form is universally accepted and a good practice to adopt.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Miss, Mrs.	Ms.
Men and ladies	Men and women/Women and men
Man and wife	Wife and Husband/Husband and wife
Girl, lasses and ladies	Woman (use woman if reference is to an adult)
The girl at the reception desk will be able to answer your questions	Our receptionist will be able to answer your questions.
Mr. and Mrs. John Smith	Jane and John Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Mr. and Ms. Smith
Chairman	Chairperson, chair, president, presiding officer

Reflections about word order:

Always putting men first in such phrases as *men and women, boys and girls, he or she, his and hers, male and female* gives the impression that women are afterthoughts or somehow less important than men.

Alternate the word order in phrases like these, so that neither X women nor men always go first.

Rather than *ladies and gentlemen*, use generic terms that favour neither sex and more accurately reflect the purpose of the gathering or meeting. Examples are *colleagues, delegates, or members of the association*.

2.2 Gender stereotypes

Our use of language often reinforces gender stereotypes and assumptions about women and men which are often formed through such gender stereotypes. It is important to avoid using these, as gender stereotypes limit and trivialize both women and men, presenting inaccurate images.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Social Good Summit attendees and their wives are invited.	Social Good Summit attendees and their partners are invited.
John and Mary both have full time jobs; he helps her with the housework.	John and Mary both have full time jobs; they share the housework.
Research scientists often neglect their wives and children.	Research scientists often neglect their families.



The average construction worker is experiencing impacts on his health due to hazardous working conditions by the age of 35 years.	Recent research revealed that construction workers are experiencing impacts on their health due to hazardous working conditions by the age of 35 years.
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2.3 Avoid exclusionary forms

When using gendered pronouns it is good practice to stick to one pronoun, or use plural, or eliminate the use of pronouns altogether by rewording the sentence.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Each employee will do better if he has a voice in the decision.	Employees will do better if they have a voice in the decision
Listen to the employee as he uses his short, simple sentences to communicate.	Listen to the employee who is using short, simple sentences to communicate.
Everyone must do his part.	Everyone must do their part.
The employer will address the situation when he is ready.	The employer will address the situation when ready.
The individual is strongly influenced by his family's values.	As individuals, we are strongly influenced by our families' values.
Each child was to write an essay on his favorite hobby.	Each child was to write an essay on his or her favorite hobby.
Ladies and Gentlemen	Colleagues, delegates, or members of the association

In some cases, you can avoid using *he* by addressing the reader directly. This is a particularly good alternative when explaining how to do things.

You can sometimes use *one* in place of a third-person pronoun. Bear in mind that this word choice will change the tone of your writing making it more formal.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Each driver must be sure to renew his automobile license yearly	Be sure to renew your automobile license yearly
A director should require an estimate before he hires a consultant	As a director, one should require an estimate before hiring a consultant

If all else fails, rewrite the sentence to eliminate the pronoun *he*.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
When an editor revises a document, he usually marks his changes in red	When revising a document, an editor usually marks changes in red
	An editor who is revising a document usually marks changes in red
	Editors usually mark their changes in red.

2.4 Create a gender balance/ambiguity

In written and oral communications, it is important to be mindful of the gender implications of generic terms. Generic are nouns and pronouns intended to be used for both women and men. Some generics are also male-specific, which creates ambiguity and excludes women. Male-



specific generics, or false generics, tend to call up primarily male images for readers and listeners. Their continued use, therefore, is incompatible with gender –inclusive language.

The following examples will provide you with an understanding of how these false generics came into use and how you can eliminate them from your writing and conversation.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Man	Human being, people, individuals
Fatherland	Native land
Mankind	Humanity, human beings, people
Mother tongue	Native tongue
Man's search for knowledge has led him to improve scientific methodology	The search of knowledge has led us to improve scientific methodology. People have continually sought knowledge. This led to improve scientific methodology.
Nature of man	Nature of the human being
Man's achievements	Human achievements
The average man, man in the street	The average person/individual, people in general, one
Manpower	Staff, employees, human resources, personnel
Subordinate	Colleague, worker, employee

To avoid this male-specific generics rewriting a sentence in the plural is often the best choice.

2.5 Promote gender equity through titles, labels and names/biased terms

Titles for people and occupations often reflect inequitable assumptions about males and females; gender-sensitive language promotes more inclusive and equitable representations for both females and males.

Additionally, feminine suffixes such as –ess or –ette can also reinforce the notion that women are subordinate, or doing a different job to men. It is better to use the generic term to avoid promoting gender inequality.

A biased term is a word or phrase that promotes a preconceived opinion or prejudice. The following biased terms should be avoided.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Salesman/ Saleswoman/ Salesgirl/ Saleslady	Sales clerk, salesperson, sales representative
Career woman	Professional, executive, business person
Stewardess, waitress	Flight attendant, waiter/server
Male nurse	Nurse
Woman doctor/ Lady doctor/ Female doctor	Doctor
Congressman	Member of Congress
Spokesman	Spokesperson, representative, official
Policeman/men	Police officer
Authoress	Author
Housewife	Homemaker, consumer, customer...
Cleaning lady	Cleaner, housekeeper, janitor
Spinster	Woman, unmarried woman (if marital status is relevant)
Girl Friday	Assistant, secretary



There are certain names when you are writing to people you do not know that are obviously female or male but others are ambiguous. It is now common to omit courtesy titles altogether, a rule which is especially helpful when the signature does not make gender or marital status clear.

If you know only an initial or initials and last name of the person to whom you are writing use the initials without a courtesy title; e.g. *Dear J Thompson*.

If you are writing to a person you do not know at all, use *Dear Sir or Madam* or *Dear Madam or sir*, or address your letter to a specific title; e.g. *Dear office Manager*.

When you are writing to more than one person of the same gender, either omit courtesy titles or use *Mses.* for women and *Messrs.* for men.

When writing to two or more people of different genders, omit courtesy titles. When writing to a group or organization never use the exclusive *Dear Sirs*.

Gender Biased	Gender sensitive
Dear Sirs.	Dear colleagues, Dear members
Dear Mrs. Chris Eilson	Dear Chris Eilson
Dear Mr. Howard Guck	Dear Howard Guck
To whom it may concern	Dear Sir or Madam/ Dear Madam or sir
Ms Alice McKinnon, CL Carter, Mr. Carl Ellis, Miss Regina Rogers	Dear Alice McKinnon, Chris Carter, Carl Ellis, Regina Rogers



3. List of resources

The resources listed below have been used as a reference to create our own guide. All of them are recommendable to help increase your knowledge and understanding of the issues underlying gender-inclusive analysis.

Dodd, J.S (1986) *The ACS Style Guide: A Manual for Authors and Editors*. Washington, DC: American Chemical Society.

DANIDA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1993) *Women in Development*. Copenhagen.

Karl, M. (1995) *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision-making*. London

Development Assistance Committee, (1998) *Guidelines for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Co-operation*. OECD

Desprez-Bouanchaud, A et al. (1999) *Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language*. UNESCO

J. Wright (2003) *A guide to gender-inclusive language policy*. Government Office for the South East

Kumpf, B. (2008) *Principles of Gender-Sensitive Communication*. UNDP Gender Equality Seal Initiative.

Development Assistance Committee (2008) *Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Materials, Advocacy and Communications*. The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA)