

Bias-Free Language in Academic Writing

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Using Bias-Free Language in Academic Writing

What is Bias-Free Language?

Some people feel neutral, or “unbiased” language encroaches on their freedom of speech, others believe it should be mandated. How you use language outside the academic forum is up to you. However, the use of unbiased language in academic literature is sometimes necessary to avoid insulting your reader or inadvertently politicizing your work, both of which can divert attention from your main argument. Apart from not being “politically correct,” many dated words and phrases can simply feel jarring or distracting in the flow of your writing.

Writing in unbiased language can be an adjustment, but it is an important part of learning how to write in an academic tone within your discipline. Use online dictionaries and your subject area’s style guide (e.g. APA, MLA, or Chicago) to help identify and choose bias-free language. After you have finished a draft of your paper, you might want to use your word processor’s “find” editing function to identify any “biased” terms you may have missed. Some desktop grammar checkers have the ability to point out these kinds of errors for you and suggest changes as well.

❖ ABILITY

Ability-neutral language refers to a person as an individual, rather than defining the person by their disability. Since not all people with the same disability have the same concerns or personalities, it is important to relate this in your writing.

“When writing [about] people with disabilities, ensure that the words you use are factual, objective, and inclusive. Don’t hesitate to seek advice from organizations of people with disabilities on how to report on, discuss, and write about disability” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013).

People with disabilities rightly deserve the respect given them with the use of commonly accepted terms. Especially in medical writing and the social sciences, a separation must be made between a given condition and the person, who may not wish to be defined by their disability; this can be accomplished by using “person-first” language.

Examples:

- Blind → Person who is blind
- Cripple → Person with a mobility impairment
- Handicapped → Person with a disability
- Invalid → Person with a disability
- Normal → Person without a disability
- Congenital defect → Person who has a congenital disability
- Epileptic → Person who has epilepsy
- Mentally ill → Person with a mental illness
- Sufferer → Person with a disability (does not necessarily suffer)
- Wheelchair-bound → Person who uses a wheelchair / wheelchair user

❖ RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Topics relating to race are often integral to academic discourse. Make an effort to use language for discussing race and ethnicity that is inclusive and respectful; this may require doing some additional reading and research to identify preferred terminology. Whenever possible, identify a person or group of people by their nationality. Archaic or insulting racial epithets should be simply avoided in academic writing, except (and only) when absolutely imperative to your topic.

Also, watch your capitalization: for example, “capital-I” Indigenous refers to a person or culture, “small-i” indigenous refers to a thing or concept. Be aware that there are many examples of racial terms which until recently were considered polite in the English language, but have now fallen out of favour. It is up to you as a writer to keep yourself informed about lexical shifts.

Examples:

- Aborigine → Aboriginal/Indigenous Australian
- American Indian/Native → Aboriginal/Indigenous/First Nations
- Caucasian → European/White (capitalized)
- East Indian → South Asian
- Gypsy → Traveller/Roma/Romani
- Jew → Jewish
- Negro → African/African Canadian (or other nationality)/Black (capitalized)
- Oriental → Asian, East Asian

❖ GENDER

Changes in writing with regards to gender have become standard. Gender is considered a spectrum that refers to a person's desired pronouns and outward appearance; biological sex is binary and necessary for research in the sciences, especially in medical literature. Some gender-neutral language, such as suffix-swapping has been around for decades, for example: **businessman** → **businesswoman**. Some gender-switching terms have fallen out of use: **actor/actress** → **actor**. Care ought to be taken to refer to a man, woman, trans-, or nonbinary person as such when necessary, but for generalizations or plurals, a gender-neutral approach can also aid in building straightforward and ideologically impartial statements in your work.

“Gender-neutral language can be used in any writing where the gender of a person is unknown or unimportant” (Warren Wilson College Writing Center, n.d.).

Adapting Gendered Nouns:

Common Expressions

- Man/Mankind → humanity, humankind, people

Professions

- Policeman → police officer
- Mailman → postal worker or mail carrier
- Waiter/Waitress → server

Examples:

The following sentence can be adapted in several ways:

“In my opinion, the impact of media consumption on a person depends on his or her level of intake.”

1. Pluralize nouns and pronouns

In my opinion, the impact of media consumption on people depends on their levels of intake.

2. ‘They’ as a singular pronoun

In my opinion, the impact of media consumption on a person depends on their level of intake.

3. Passive verb forms

In my opinion, the effect of a person’s media consumption varies depending on intake levels.

4. Use ‘one’ instead of he/she

In my opinion, the impact of media consumption on a person depends on one’s level of intake.

References

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