Things to Eliminate in Your Writing:

Utilizing Gendered Language Choices

Part I:
What is it?

Unlike many languages, English no longer has what is called **grammatical gender**-- a way of categorizing nouns in which they are assigned as masculine, feminine, or neuter (not all languages with grammatical gender have this last one).

This is intuitive when the noun itself has gendered properties (for example, the Spanish *niño* is the masculine noun for the English "boy"-- *el niño,* or "the boy"). It is less intuitive, however, when the noun has no inherent gendered properties (for example, the feminine Spanish *la casa,* or "the house"). You'll notice in these examples that the gender of the noun changed the form of the article (*el* and *la* respectively-- both equivalent to the English "the"). This is how grammatical gender works in languages that feature it. Gendered nouns change other grammatical structures (articles, case endings, etc.) that modify or interact with those gendered nouns.

As I said, English used to have this feature, but no longer does-- the last vestigial remnants having mostly disappeared by the 14th century or so.

Up until the last few decades, however, writing students were often taught to use what was called **universal gender** when referring to a hypothetical or unknown person. I was taught this way, for example, back in the early and mid-1980s-- though even then this was becoming a bit suspect.

In simplest terms, what we're talking about is defaulting to a masculine pronoun when one doesn't know the gender of the person in question. Thus, instead of writing something like, "By using this word, the reader understands the author's negativity toward the concept in question. **He or she** can look at the connotation and draw the appropriate conclusion," one would simply write, "**He** can look at the connotation…"

Related words, such as the male gendered "mankind" or "man" as standing for all people (male, female, and otherwise), were also not discouraged.

Part II:
Why is this a problem?

Here's the deal: the world has moved on a bit from days of yore when the default subject was male. People can become whatever they want to be, and the underlying assumption that the only people that matter are men is an idea that belongs in the dustbin of history.

Sure, 99% of the time writers or speakers using these default language settings have zero agenda. Not every default "he," for instance, is an overt defense of the patriarchy, and it's silly to pretend like it is. What such lazy writing does do, however, is help to create a background worldview in which such things form part of the underlying cultural assumptions about gender-- that men are (at least on some level) the ideal abstract subject, that they really are the only ones who matter.

That's not cool.

It's not just me, though. It is now standard academic usage to use more inclusive pronouns. If you default to *he* and *him*, this will be corrected over and over in your writing. You will lose both points and credibility.

Worse, if you do persist in doing this sort of thing, some will assume that you *are* trying to make some kind of point-- that you really *are* explicitly defending a worldview in which men are valued more than others.

If you really do hold this point of view: fair enough. I'm not trying to infringe on your right to be a sexist douche. I will point out, however, that it is foolish to advertise yourself as a sexist douche in areas where your sexist, douchey behaviors do nothing but alienate the people reading and grading your work.

Save your sexism for your social media feed. People expect others to be idiots in that arena anyway.

Curse you patriarchy! I will take you down one pronoun at a time!
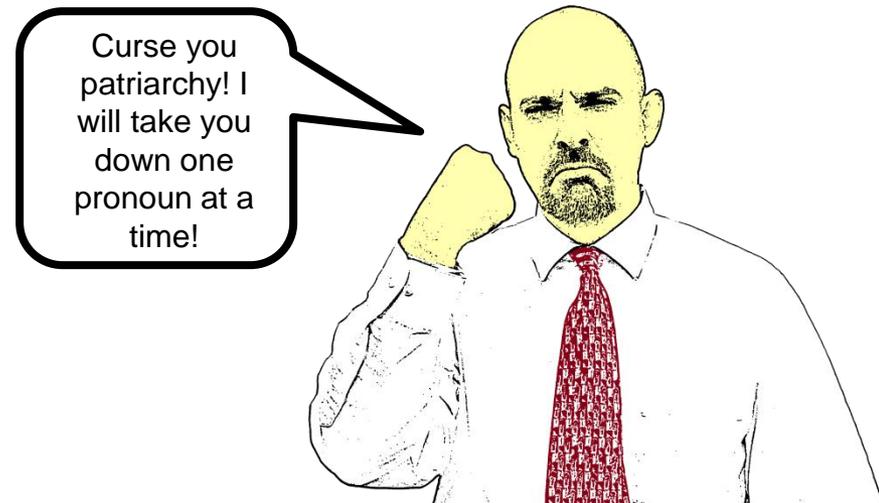
Is rejecting gendered language going to solve sexism in society? Of course it isn't. (Sorry, cartoon me.)

What it is going to do, however, is send a signal that we, as a society, value inclusion-- that these little social markers of male privilege aren't going to pass unchallenged any more. Words do matter.

Avoiding gendered language is also the norm in all academic writing (journals, dissertations, conference papers, etc.), as well as all serious journalism (newspapers, magazines, webzines, etc.). Even if you do it for no other reason, refusing to avoid gendered language choices signals your ignorance of the rules of discourse in the arena in which you want your argument to be heard. Flouting these conventions means people won't take you seriously.

A word of caution: I am not advocating removing the words *he* or *him* from your writing. If you know the gender of the individual in question, be as specific as your knowledge permits. All I am saying is not to default to male when you don't know.

In a related issue, this specificity of language choices includes adopting the pronoun that someone prefers when writing about that individual. This is just courtesy. For example, if I asked people to call me by my middle name and someone persisted in calling me by my first name (despite knowing my preference), that person would be a jackass. Don't be a jackass; respect other people's self-definitions (even if you find them strange).

Part III:
What to do Instead

Solution One: Avoid the Problem Altogether

Refer to "the reader," "a person," etc. without collapsing to dodgy pronouns.

Keep it abstract by referring to "one"-- such as, "By using this word, the reader understands the author's negativity toward the concept in question. **One** can look at the connotation and draw the appropriate conclusion."

Doing this sort of thing is never wrong and is probably what you should be defaulting to in the first place.

Apply this solution in conjunction with one of the other solutions that follow.

Solution Two: Include Both Genders*

Instead of defaulting to *he*, *him and his*, instead use *he or she*, *him and her*, and *his or her*.

Replacing *he or she* with *s/he* is also acceptable (read aloud as "she")-- though you want to be consistent (don't use both variants in the same assignment).

Do not use *he/she* and *him/her* constructions in formal writing (which means you will never be using them for assignment in this class).

To go back to my example: "By using this word, the reader understands the author's negativity toward the concept in question. **He or she** can look at the connotation and draw the appropriate conclusion."

This is typically what I do in my writing. It is the most neutral option.

* If you are about to object, "But gender isn't a binary," bracket this objection for a second or skip ahead to Solution Four.

Solution Three: Embrace Your Inner Feminist

Instead of defaulting to *he*, *him*, and *his*, default to *she*, *her*, and *her*.

When you do this, it explicitly makes a political point that women have historically been excluded from many areas of the cultural discourse. By defaulting to feminine pronouns, you are carving out a space for female identity in places that formerly were assumed to be the domain of men.

I will sometimes do this in my writing as well-- though I will obviously be consistent as to whether I am using *he and she* constructions or defaulting to *she* in the same text. You don't do both.

Solution Four: Use Completely Non-Gendered Pronouns

This is where I suspect the language is headed (many grammarians agree), as people increasingly recognize that the male/female binary is more a cultural than a biological concept. In such a world, defaulting to *either* male or female pronouns seems arbitrary and non-inclusive.

Unfortunately, there isn't one standard way of doing this yet in English. The most common, though, is to replace the default *he* with *they*, the default *him* with *them*, and the default *his* with *their*. In essence, you are replacing singular constructions with the more neutral plural constructions (though treating them as singular for subject/verb agreement purposes).

To return again to my example, "By using this word, the reader understands the author's negativity toward the concept in question. **They** can look at the connotation and draw the appropriate conclusion."

This sounds strange to me (especially this singular *they*), but I am coming around to it. It is currently much more common in British usage.

However, because there is no agreed upon standard *yet*, most American academic writing and journalism still defaults to one of the last two solutions.

Part IV:
Conclusions

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Do not default to male pronouns or uncritically use words like "mankind."

Avoiding male-gendered language is the norm for all academic writing and serious journalism.

In an academic setting, you will lower your grade if you default to male pronouns. You will also lower your credibility with the reader.

The general rule of thumb is to, if possible, avoid any gendered pronouns.

If it is not possible, adopt one of the following: *he or she* constructions, a default to feminine pronouns, or the use of the singular *they*.

Be consistent within the same text (except consistently sexist).