

Non-sexist language

THE LANGUAGE USED IN UOC TEXTS MUST BE CLEAR AND RESPECTFUL

- We must make efforts to ensure that everyone feels included and represented.
 - We must avoid messages that involve and contribute to stereotypes.
 - We must avoid generalizations and simplifications that fail to reflect reality.

LANGUAGE EVOLVES TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE THAT USE IT

In a society where we are calling for equality among all people and groups, university communication (whether teaching, academic or institutional) must contribute to pushing language and reality forwards towards this goal.



Traditionally English has often used masculine forms (he, him, his, himself) to refer generally to people of both sexes. Example: **Each student must submit his paper by midnight on 30 June.**

However, in keeping with more modern usage, the UOC recommends using gender-neutral formulations wherever possible, although never at the expense of ensuring a natural, idiomatic style.

GENDER-NEUTRAL FORMULATIONS



GENDER

In speech, and increasingly in writing, the pronoun **they** and its inflected forms (**their, them, themselves**) are often used to get around this problem; indeed, there is a growing evidence-based movement that champions the use of the so-called **singular they** <<https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>>.

For example

Each student must submit their paper by midnight on 30 June.

Rightly or wrongly, however, many people are still irked by this usage. It can thus be preferable in some cases to seek a less controversial solution. To this end, one common alternative is to restate the entire sentence to make it plural.

For example

All students must submit their papers by midnight on 30 June.

Another is to omit the problematic reference altogether, particularly when it does not add information that cannot be otherwise inferred.

For example

Papers must be submitted by midnight on 30 June.

When the sentence in question provides instructions, you may also consider using the gender-neutral **you** or an imperative formulation.

For example

**You should submit your paper by midnight on 30 June.
Submit your paper by midnight on 30 June.**

Finally, on rare occasions, constructions such as **he/she, s/he or he or she** (or the corresponding inflected forms) may be used.

For example

Each student must submit his or her paper by midnight on 30 June.

Bear in mind, however, that such constructions are increasingly considered unwieldy, and their overuse can make a text sound stilted. They are thus best avoided as much as possible. Exceptions may be made for certain types of official forms and documents.



GENDERED TERMS

In many cases, gender-neutral terms now exist for traditionally gendered expressions.

USE

INSTEAD OF

chair or chairperson

chairman

flight attendant

steward/stewardess

police officer

policeman

Generally speaking, the UOC prefers **to use gender-neutral terms when possible and natural**. Use your best judgement for when their use might be appropriate.

In contrast, **be sure not to re-gender sentences that already use gender-neutral terms by adding gendered phrases**. For instance, phrases such as male nurse or female executive, which may unwittingly reinforce sex-role stereotypes, **should be avoided unless the author is intentionally drawing a distinction based on gender**. Even then, the sentence can often be restated in a more gender-neutral fashion. For example, the sentence Female executives account for only 30% of the total number could be rewritten as Women account for only 30% of executives.

Where it is necessary to include such a phrase, use the modifier female or woman/women rather than lady or girl to avoid negative and/or dated connotations.



ALTERNATING GENDERED TERMS

When it is deemed absolutely necessary to use both a masculine and a feminine term, be sure to alternate which comes first.

For example

aunts and uncles [...] uncles and aunts

Alternatively, in some texts you may be able to alternate between examples involving one gender and examples involving the other. Texts about parenting, for instance, often use alternating examples involving daughters and sons. That said, this usage can be confusing and it is thus essential when following it to ensure the coherence and readability of the text as a whole.

Further reading



Interuniversity Style Guide for Writing Institutional Texts in English, chapter 6 <<http://openaccess.uoc.edu/webapps/o2/bitstream/10609/73907/1/Interuniversity%20Style%20Guide.pdf>>.