Unbiased Language

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

The term "**biased language**" refers to the derogatory language used to demean or exclude people from certain groups based on their nationalities, ethnic groups, gender, or sextual orientations.

"**Unbiased language**" means using neutral language free from prejudices and discrimination. There are many different ways to avoid biases.

Gender

"Gendered language" assumes that **a singular or** a **plural noun is a man.** Instead, "gender-neutral language" is the genderless language to avoid gender biases and sexism.

For example:

Biased Language	Gender-neutral Language
Mankind	Humanity
Salesman	Salesperson
Spokesman	Spokesperson
Businessman	Businessperson
Policeman	Police Officer
Waiter/Waitress	Server
Fireman	Firefighter

Disability
Do not identify or define people by their disabilities. Instead, treat the disability as something that someone possesses. You should note that a person has a disability rather than saying "the person is disabled."

    ✖ Savitri is learning disabled.
 This says that Savitri is completely unable to learn easily. It implies victimization.

    ✓ Savitri has a learning disability.
This says that the disability is a part of Savitri. It implies that she has many other parts.

  ✗ Chung-ho is a victim of HIV.
Calling Chung-ho a victim implies that he is vulnerable, weak, and different from others.

  ✓ Chung-ho is a person living with HIV.
Instead of implying that Chung-ho is a victim of HIV, this sentence is non-judgmental.

Sexual Orientation
Refer to a person's sexual orientation only if the content needs that information.

  ✗ Her house was sold by a gay real estate agent.
Unless you are writing specifically about gay real estate agents, there is no need to identify one as "gay."

When referring to the sexual orientation, avoid using offensive or slang words. Do not assume a reader's sexual orientation is the same as yours.

Normal, Abnormal
As a general rule, avoid using the word "normal" when referring to gender, races, disabilities, or sexual orientations. "Normal" generalizes a group of people or a characteristic, whereas academic writing should be precise and specific. "Normal" also has an implied judgment about who or what is not considered normal. The word "abnormal" is offensive when it is applied to people. It suggests those with disabilities fail to live up to the ideal standard. It also implies that they are different in ways beyond their specific disabilities.

Three strategies for using unbiased language
1. Use genderless terms
You can avoid using gendered pronouns such as "he" or "she" by using genderless pronouns.

  ✗ Whether the customer liked the jacket or not, **he** could not return it as this was the final sale.

The customer should not be identified as male unless the writer is sure that the customer is a man. There are three possible solutions.

  ✓ Whether the customer liked the jacket or not, **it** could not be returned as this was the final sale.
  ✓ Whether **customers** liked **their jackets** or not, **they** could not be returned as they were final sales.
  ✓ Whether **they** liked **their jackets** or not, **customers** could not return them as they were final sales.

2. Use non-gendered words to refer to a group of people rather than using "man" or "woman"

Example
Biased
Everyone was listening to the **chairman**.
Inclusive
Everyone was listening to the **chair**.

3. Avoid racial slurs and stereotypes of racial and ethnic groups
Examples of stereotypes
Avoid describing a group of people with a common trait:
- ✗ Friendly Canadians
- ✗ Overweight Americans

Examples of modifiers
Avoid any generalizations about nations or ethnic groups, either positive or negative:
- ✗ Lazy
- ✗ Slow
- ✗ Hard-working

Examples of terminology
It is acceptable and often necessary to write about different nationalities and ethnic groups.
- ✗ Oriental
- ✓ Asian

Practice Exercises:
Change the following sentences from the biased to the unbiased:

1)
Every security guard should carry his phone when on call.
Every security guard should carry _____ phone when on call.

2)
Before a doctor writes a prescription, he must know every detail of the patient's history.
Before_____, a doctor must know every detail of the patient's history.

3)
For Tamiko to pass the course, she must study harder.
In order to pass the course, _____must study harder.

4)
As long as Malik keeps drinking coffee, he will stay awake.
As long as there is enough coffee to drink,_____will keep Malik awake.

5) The teacher should consider the needs of his students when developing the syllabus.
_____ should consider the needs of _____ students when developing the syllabus.

Choose the correct term. Look up the words you do not understand in a dictionary.
6)
A) This parka is made from **synthetic** fibre.
B) This parka is made from **manmade** fibre.

7)
A) In many cultures, it is important to value one's **forefathers**.
B) In many cultures, it is important to value one's **ancestors**.

8)
A) I love being on the water. I come from a family of **anglers**.
B) I love being on the water. I come from a family of **fishermen**.

9) Choose the best unbiased noun to fill in the blank:
From the beginning of time, _____ has improved technology.
mankind/humanity

10) If you are thirsty, just push the button and ask the _____ for some water.
flight attendant/stewardess

Answers:
1) a
2) writing a prescription
3) Tamiko
4) It
5) Teachers, their
6) A) synthetic
7) B) ancestors
8) A) anglers
9) humanity
10) flight attendant

More resources for unbiased language
Avoiding gender and racial stereotypes – Queen's University
https://sass.queensu.ca/onlineresource/topics/avoiding-gender-and-racial-stereotypes/

Choose Your Words: Avoiding Biased Language - Cengage
https://college.cengage.com/english/raimes/digitalkeys/keyshtml/choose_7.htm

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops: https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels. Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate. **Looking for more learning strategies?** Visit us at: http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/.