

# Editor's Craft

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## Neologisms: 3. Sexist Language

The past 20 years have seen something of a revolution with respect to sexist language, and not a moment too soon. I have little patience with such fatuous terms as “personhole cover” and “waitpersons,” and hope that they were dreamed up by someone who enjoys poking fun at the world. It is, however, nice to think that a Chair or convener calls a meeting to order, and that firefighters — male and female — save us from the threatening blaze.

Writers have responded to the need for such rephrasing in several ways. Some simply use the pronoun “they” whether the verb is singular or plural. We all hear such usage day in and day out, but to have it assault our eyes as well is not to be tolerated. A person does not have *their* shoes on the wrong feet; but an author who writes like that certainly has disregarded a basic as simple as left and right — subject-verb agreement — in addition to having aroused the scorn of his or her editor.

Others employ the curious, and to me, obvious, device he/she, his/hers, and so on. This is a cop-out and it is tiresome to read. When confronted with it over and over, any reader would be excused for giving the author full marks for meticulous fairness and a failing grade for intelligent, interesting self-expression. It is a precarious construction, as well. The author of a text on urologic disorders used it faithfully throughout the book, including the chapter on benign prostatic hyperplasia. In reference lists I still find articles that deal with such topics as the congenital etiology of endometriosis in man. As a silver-tongued friend of mine would say, “Gimme a break.”

A variation is s/he, intended to shorten and still be inclusive. To me, that is even sloppier. In addition, some might be infuriated that the feminine side of the virgule is truncated by two-thirds, while the masculine is intact.

It is part of my profession to pick nits: however, I am not going to pick fights. Therefore, I simply attempt to edit the matter away. This can be done in several ways; enough that it is rarely necessary to spell out “he or she.” One, of course, is to make all of the subjects plural, and then one can correctly refer back to them as “they.”

Another is completely to reword the sentence so that it takes the passive rather than the active voice. Thus, “The patient should continue with that dosage until he experiences the following symptoms,” becomes, “That dosage should be maintained until the patient experiences . . .” Some object to the passive voice; however, in the professional scientific literature it has the advantage of being, in addition to nonsexist, matter-of-fact and impersonal. (An aside is in order with respect to impersonality: it must never be carried so far as to refer to patients as “cases.”) Rewrites are, in fact the best way to deal with sexist language. The examples are too many to include, not to mention elusive to my memory as I write this. Authors whose works have been edited in this respect will understand what I mean.

It is also possible to alternate sexes, referring in one example to the patient as she and in the next as he. This is clumsy, however, and often ends up becoming as contrived as he/she.

A final point must be made on this subject concerning the use of the masculine pronoun universally to refer to professionals such as physicians and clinical pharmacists. It would surprise me greatly if every single author who committed that gaffe worked exclusively with other males. Thus it is perhaps more disrespectful to refer to “the surgeon” as he than to the patient, as by so doing, one automatically excludes some of one’s colleagues as well as one’s audience.

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