

WRITING GENDER-NEUTRAL TEACHING GUIDES



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Introduction

The use of gender-neutral language is common practice in publications issued by public agencies and in documents produced in the field of education. There are a number of approaches to achieving a gender-neutral text. Some authors systematically use both masculine and feminine forms throughout their document. Others uniformly adopt the masculine form while prefacing the work with an explanation or cautionary note to justify this choice.

So far, attempts at gender-neutral writing have been laudable, but the results have sometimes been awkward and insufficient. To produce a non-sexist text involves more than merely providing all its masculine terms with a feminine equivalent. Achieving gender neutrality in a text is a linguistic operation that demands subtlety, intelligence and the willingness to break old language habits. This process presents an interesting challenge when applied to writing teaching guides, considering the variety of textual forms employed in these complex documents: theory-oriented exposition; advice on methodology; explanations of pedagogical approaches; lists of learning goals, etc. Each of these requires a particular tone, serves a particular purpose and must adhere to a certain style. Consequently, the writing of a gender-neutral text calls for special vigilance and flexibility.

This document has been prepared specifically to address the questions mentioned above with regard to writing teaching guides. It contains the following:

- basic guidelines for writing gender-neutral texts
- samples of gender-biased texts and how they can be corrected using various editorial techniques
- devices and principles applicable to adapting these guidelines and editorial techniques to the different types of text appearing in teaching guides

Basic Guidelines

In producing a gender-neutral text, the basic guiding principle is the one that writers have always used to ensure a high-quality text: expressing a clear message and formulating it in consistent language. [Translation]

Monique Biron,
Au féminin: guide de féminisation des titres de fonction et des textes
coll. Guides de l'Office de la langue française.
(Québec : Les Publications du Québec, 1991).

Guideline 1: Write out masculine and feminine forms in full, where applicable

This guideline applies especially to job titles, as it makes it possible to give equal importance to the masculine and feminine forms of a title, where they exist in English:

actors and actresses, waiters and waitresses

If a job title has two distinct forms and both the masculine and feminine are written out, there should be little risk of encumbering the text or hindering readability, as most job titles in English employ a unisex form (doctor, lawyer, teacher, social worker, journalist, etc.).

Guideline 2: Use neutral forms

As much as possible, choose terms that designate both females and males. You can use collective terms, position titles or other gender-neutral expressions:

the teaching staff, the school management, the respondents, the school authorities, the students, the IT specialists

Unacceptable forms

Any truncated forms that use parentheses, slashes, dashes or other signs should be avoided:

actor/tress, actor-tress

In addition, any awkward redundancy should be avoided:

A teenager is able to take care of himself or herself; however, he or she often relies on adults and he or she sometimes refuses to wash his or her clothes.

Solutions to Common Problems

In the following pages, you will find examples of texts that show problems of gender neutrality on the left, with their corresponding solutions on the right. The examples are based on instances of faulty wording found in teaching guides. The solutions make use of various editing techniques and are given for informational purposes only. Editorial changes can be made in a wide variety of ways; the proposed solutions are not necessarily the only nor the best possible options.

◆ Redundancy

Example	Solution
Ask <i>the children</i> to prepare a schedule. Ask <i>the children</i> to select activities that they like, not to please their <i>teacher</i> . <i>He/she</i> can help <i>the children</i> to make their choice.	Using pronouns Ask the children to prepare a schedule. Help them to select activities they would genuinely like to do themselves, rather than ones they think would please the teacher.
Ask <i>the students</i> to group the information. Help <i>the students</i> to compare their results. Ask <i>the children</i> to justify their choices.	Clustering of information The students, working individually, must group the information, then compare their results in teams and justify their choices.
The activities allow <i>the student</i> to express perceptions. They also help <i>him/her</i> to compare <i>his/her</i> perceptions with that of other students. <i>He/she</i> will learn to put his points of view into perspective.	Reformulation The goal of those activities is to help the students express their perceptions, compare them with those of other students and put their points of view into perspective.
The foreword in the student's manual shows <i>the student</i> the learning objectives that <i>he/she</i> must reach within the year. This information will show <i>him/her</i> that <i>he/she</i> has acquired knowledge. <i>He/she</i> will be better prepared to learn new material.	Replacing a word with its equivalent The foreword in the student's manual highlights the objectives to be reached within the year. This information helps the students to position themselves within the program, to identify and update their acquired knowledge (if applicable) and to prepare themselves to embark on a new learning cycle.

◆ Cumbersome Style

Example	Solution
<p>Ask every <i>student</i> if there are, in <i>his/her</i> neighbourhood, town or city, individuals or places that <i>he/she</i> is proud of. Ask the <i>student</i> to identify those individuals or places and to express the reasons why <i>he/she</i> is proud of them.</p>	<p>Using neutral or plural forms</p> <p>Ask the students to identify in their environment (neighbourhood, town, city) individuals or places that they are proud of and express the reasons why they feel that way.</p>

Guidelines and Tips for Writing Different Types of Text

As seen in the previous section, gender-neutral writing does not necessarily require that both masculine and feminine forms be used systematically. It is rather a matter of getting used to saying things differently, formulating them in a way that gives the feminine form its fair place.

We will now examine some types of texts often found in teaching guides, and the gender-neutral writing techniques that seem most appropriate for each case. These techniques are provided for informational purposes only. It is your responsibility to choose those that suit you best and to use them judiciously.

◆ Enumerative Texts

Enumerations are very common in teaching guides: they are used to list learning objectives, show the steps of a teaching method or a series of activities to be done in class.

Using the Infinitive

The infinitive is a shortcut used in an enumeration. It is generally used appropriately in a table listing objectives, but not always correctly in a list of learning activities or instructions, where the words *student*, *child*, *children* or *pupil* tend to be repeated.

Tip: Write a to-do list.

During these activities, the students must:

- *form teams of . . .*
- *read the article on . . .*
- *discuss . . .*

◆ Methodological Tips

Methodological tips are generally presented as instructions for describing the steps of the teaching method, or explaining the topic studied or how to carry out an activity.

Using a Neutral Tone

You can give a neutral tone to methodological tips by using the techniques listed below.

- Use a direct style, addressing all teachers as “you” to avoid having to indicate both the masculine and feminine. However, take care not to use a tone that is too directive. For instance, you could say:

In the following exercise, you will show the students how to . . .

- Impersonal phrases can also be useful to avoid redundancy:

It would be interesting to . . .

It is . . .

The use of posters is necessary to . . .

The class layout should allow for . . .

Tip: Choose the method(s) with which you feel most comfortable.

Methodological tips play an important role in teaching guides. They must therefore be written coherently and intelligibly. The right tone must also be chosen. In some cases, a direct style is preferable, while in others, more than one style will be appropriate.

◆ Lesson Catalysts and Simulation Exercises

Teaching guides often include special types of instructions concerning lesson catalysts and simulation exercises. These instructions may differ somewhat from those found in the many other directions on methodology. Their purpose is to stimulate teachers' creativity and help them in turn ignite the curiosity of their students. Therefore, the tone of these instructions should leave a margin for improvisation.

Using Scripting

Scripting can help set a tone or create a climate for a simulation exercise. Instead of describing actions to be performed, it sketches the outline of a role to play. This is a way of avoiding heavy, redundant phrases and lending animation to the description of an activity. However, the outline must be concise. Its purpose is to start the exercise off, not to detail the entire procedure of the activity.

Tip: Set the stage and leave some room for improvisation.

Take a look at this poster.

Can anyone describe it?

What did you feel earlier when you first saw the poster?

◆ Statements of Theoretical Principles

Teaching guides often feature statements intended to explain a teaching approach, the intent of a program or some particular aspect of a subject being taught. This type of text is often seen in an introduction. It can easily be written in an objective tone that does not distract from the subject at hand.

Using Neutral Forms

Neutral forms of writing are especially useful in discussing a topic without referring to individuals.

Tip: Use an objective tone.

It is important to . . .

That method is especially interesting because . . .

The program calls for . . .

◆ Inserts, Teaching Notes and Remarks

The explanatory notes appended to the instructions or main texts should be written with the entire document in mind. They should not be redundant or add unnecessary information.

Tip: Use short sentences.

Using the infinitive or imperative is convenient for clear inserts. However, it is not always feasible. Sometimes, complete sentences must be used, but they must be kept as short as possible.

Conclusion

Writing a teaching guide—or any other document—is first and foremost an act of communication. The language must be clear, relevant and appropriate for its intended audience. Therefore, writing gender-neutral texts should not diminish the quality of the content, but rather improve it.

How is such improvement achieved? The focused attention required promotes vigilance in writing and develops the habit of effectively selecting techniques and formulations most appropriate to the message and its readers. This extra care quickly becomes automatic. All that is necessary is the will to state things differently. The magic of writing does the rest. After a while, it becomes second nature to write in a way that gives both men and women equal visibility in the text.

In short, successful gender-neutral writing involves a new way of saying things and a new way of thinking.

References

The following reference materials contain suggestions for writing gender-neutral texts.

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