

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Guidelines

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Welcome

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we may imply cultural stereotypes in our expressions even when we don't hold discriminatory or hurtful assumptions, and this contributes to strengthening those stereotypes. The word choices we employ may be biased, discriminatory, or insulting in that they imply that one gender (usually man) and/or the binary gender (man/woman) structure is the norm, which obliterates any other gender identity and life experience.

To be gender inclusive in our text and speech, we should actively avoid language expressions based on stereotypical and discriminatory cultural attitudes. Language that is gender inclusive accepts and values each individual for who they are, reduces gender stereotyping, raises awareness of diversity, promotes social change, and advances equality.

One of the pillars of the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds.

ECAS is committed to gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds. The use of gender-neutral language, or gender-inclusive language, is one of the ways of implementing this commitment.

Please note that:

These guidelines provide recommendations specifically for the use of gender-inclusive language applied to the English language, in particular in written texts. However, the basic principles remain relevant when using other languages (*please see Appendix 1*).

Although aspiring to use a language that is inclusive and reflects all members of society by considering other possible grounds of discrimination such as age, ethnicity, or disability status, these recommendations are focused on the gender aspect of language.

Finally, while also ensuring visibility for all genders, we should make sure that the solution chosen is appropriate for the type of text and its purposes.

2. USE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

APPLIED TO ENGLISH

- Singular use of *They/Them/Theirs*:

In English, we can use the pronoun *they* and its derivatives *them/theirs* to refer to a single individual. This form made its first appearance in written texts in the 14th century, and we naturally do this when we don't know a person's gender identity (e.g. *Anybody can give their suggestion*) in casual speech.

When employing it in a formal or technical text, ensure that the reader can easily understand whom *they/them/theirs* refer to when used for a single individual.

Note: alternative to *they/their/theirs* as in neutral versions of the third-person pronoun, there is also the option of using *Ze/Zie*, *Hir*, *Hirs*, *Hirself*, although this is not yet widespread enough to ensure clarity. Other alternatives exist (e.g. *Xe*, *Ver*, *Per*, *E/Ey*), however they are even less known and recognisable.

- Use combined forms:

As an alternative, you can employ combined (or paired) forms such as *she/he/they* or *her/his/their*, and their derivatives. These combined forms can be considered gender-inclusive, but they must be used thoughtfully as they risk making long texts hard to read or confusing.

In fact, they can weigh down the text if repeated too frequently in the same sentence.

Note: whatever your choice is, the use of *they* or *she/he/they* must always be preferred over combined forms such as *she/he* or *s/he* (and their derivatives) in order to be inclusive of all genders. These forms are in fact rooted in a binary gender structure (woman/man) which obliterates other gender identities, so use them only if necessary.

- If you prefer to use gender-neutral language, the best approach is to omit or replace gender-specific pronouns whenever possible. Bear in mind that rephrasing is sometimes required. Here are a few examples of strategies you can employ:

- Replace the possessive pronoun with *the*, *a/an* and *that*:

Example: *A spouse may be denied the (instead of *his/her/their*) right to a pension.*

- Use plural forms:

Example: *Students should finish their homework by Monday.* (instead of *The student should finish his/her/their homework by Monday*)

- Use the passive voice:

Example: *The meeting minutes will be shared by Monday.* (instead of *The secretary will share his/her/their meeting minutes by Monday*)

- Omit the pronouns altogether:

Example: *The Chair expressed (~~his/her/their~~) dissent.*

- Use the relative pronoun *who*:

Example: *A customer who is dissatisfied with the product can ask for a refund.* (instead of *If a customer is dissatisfied with the product, he/she/they can ask for a refund*)

- Use the pronoun *one*:

Example: *A staff member in Rome earns less than one in Milan.* (instead of *A staff member in Rome earns less than he/she/they would in Milan*)

- Repeat the noun:

Example: *If the student fails the test, the student (instead of *she/he/they*) can repeat it up to three times.*

- Use the imperative (in instructions):

Example: *First turn on your computer.* (instead of *The student should first turn on his/her/they computer*)

- Keep consistent throughout the text:

Whatever you choose, avoid alternating between masculine, feminine, gender-inclusive or gender-neutral forms when referring to the same individual or group/category of individuals.

- Avoid gender-specific titles:

Titles such as *Monsieur, Frau, Ms*, etc. should be avoided in favour of the person's full name, unless it is known that the person wants to be referred to by a specific title (that is, for instance, if the title is signalled in the email signature).

The titles *Mrs* or *Miss* used to refer to a woman's marital status (respectively, married or unmarried woman), whereas the term for men, *Mr*, was neutral in this regard (either married or unmarried). These titles derive from cultural conventions describing a woman's relationship to a man, rather than presenting her as an individual, and should not be used unless requested to do otherwise by the person you are addressing.

Note: Dr (in the sense both of medical doctor and Ph.D.) and *Professor* (abbreviated *Prof.*) can be used for all genders.

- Avoid gendered job titles:

In general, avoid irrelevant information about gender in job titles as it may have a discriminatory nature:

- avoid the use of *woman, lady* or *female* before the profession (e.g. use *doctor* instead of *female doctor*)
- conversely, avoid the use of *man* or *male* before the profession in the case of stereotypically feminine roles (e.g. use *nurse* instead of *male nurse*)

It is by now long-established that job titles like *doctor* or *lawyer* are gender-neutral. In other cases as well, a gender-neutral substitute is available to avoid gendered job titles (e.g. *firefighters, flight attendants* instead of *fireman, hostess/steward*) – please see Appendix 2.

Note: Notices of vacancies should be drafted in a gender-inclusive way in order to encourage candidates of all genders to apply.

- Avoid the generic use of *man* and its derivatives:

In English, words that are not gender-specific and refer to people in general can still end in or include the unit *man*. However, we should opt for gender-neutral alternatives whenever possible.

A few examples of terms to avoid followed by (→) the preferable alternative(s):

Chairman → *Chair* or *Chairperson*

Spokesman → *Spokesperson* or *A representative for/Speaking for...*

Mankind → *Humanity* or *People*

Man-made → *Synthetic* or *Artificial*

Manpower → *Staff* or *Staffing*

Statesman → *Political leader*

Please see Appendix 2 for more examples.

- Revert the order of gendered terms:

Some pairs of words are habitually used in a fixed order, often with the male version appearing first (e.g. *husband and wife*, *boys and girls*, *King and Queen*). This reflects and reinforces cultural values and a social hierarchy that subordinates women to men.

You should be aware of the word order in your text and make sure that you are not always putting the masculine version first (or vice versa, if also gender-connotated).

Note: please be aware that these forms perpetuate the gender binary, so use them if appropriate to the context (e.g. the married couple you are referring to is constituted by a man and a woman in the case of *wife and husband/husband and wife*).

- Avoid trivialisation:

Trivialisation means using a language that (directly or indirectly) describes one gender, often women, as inferior, or that belittles them. It is closely related to subordination as it contributes to perpetrating gender stereotypes and marginalisation in society.

One example of trivialisation is the additions of diminutive or other kind of affixes to denote that the referent is female (an example is *usherette*, while the correct form is *usher* for all genders, or the terms *master* and *mistress*, which have very different connotations).

Also, language which refers to people who are not close to you in terms of endearment (for instance, *Darling* and *Dear* when used in speech or informal written communications) promotes trivialisation as it is patronising and condescending. Note that *Dear* is still accepted as an email greeting when it precedes the name (first or full name) of the recipient (e.g. *Dear Paul* or *Dear Sara Monteiro*).

Another common way of trivialising women which should be avoided is referring to adult women as *girls* (or other versions of it, such as *gals*, *young ladies*, etc.).

Note: although unrelated to trivialisation, when addressing a group of people, avoid the use of the term *guys*. As an alternative, you can replace it with *everyone* (e.g. *Good morning, everyone!* instead of *Good morning, guys!*).

- Avoid words that imply a gender connotation to describe an aspect of a person or an object: This is especially important where the gendered term is used to describe anything associated to feminine elements with negative connotations (often meaning weak, or infantilising/objectifying women). Assigning gender to an inanimate object by using gendered pronouns applies cultural connotations which are related to gender stereotypes and contribute to perpetuating them in society. Examples:

- Victor's weak (avoid *ladylike*) throw did not impress the coach.
- Keynote speakers are free to make presentations in their native languages (avoid *mother tongues*).
- Olga bought a boat and named it (avoid *her*) *Twilight*.

Needless to say, use the pronoun *it* and its derivatives to describe an object.

- Use gender-sensitive language, if needed:

In order to be respectful of identities and to provide meaningful information on gender-specific issues, we should at times employ gender-sensitive language (where gendered forms are explicit).

Gender-specific terms should be used:

- if the gender of the person/group of people is relevant to the point being made (e.g. when presenting gender-disaggregated data)

- when referring to individual persons whose gender identity is known, that is when they have communicated it explicitly and voluntarily (e.g. *la Commissaire européenne à l'Égalité Helena Dalli*)

- General recommendations:

Do not make assumptions about someone's gender. For instance, someone's gender expression can differ from their gender identity.

Avoid using certain words or expressions if someone alerts you to their hurtful or discriminating nature.

If you are told how a person wishes to be addressed, make sure to use the name and pronouns they communicate to you.

Adding pronouns to your e-mail signature can further show your commitment to inclusiveness: e.g. *My pronouns are she/her* or *Silvia Demofonti (she/her)*.

3. APPENDIXES

3.1 Appendix 1: Use of gender-inclusive language applied to other EU languages

In order to effectively use gender-inclusive language, appropriate solutions must be sought considering the grammatical class of each language.

- **Grammatical gender languages** (Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish), where every noun has a grammatical gender, and the gender of personal pronouns usually matches the referenced noun. Common gender divisions include masculine and feminine; masculine, feminine, and neuter; or animate and inanimate.

Generic masculine terms are no longer universally used since they are often interpreted as discriminating against women. More and more, female equivalents are being created and/or employed for almost all masculine terms (for instance, *Kanzlerin, assessora*, etc.).

Also, replacing the generic masculine with dual forms for specific referents (*tutti i bambini e tutte le bambine*) has gained acceptance in many grammatical gender languages.

Lastly, combined forms (e.g. *collaborateur-trice, un/une touriste, tutte/i*) can be used, however do so carefully in order to keep the text easy to read.

Note: unfortunately, very few to no gender-inclusive terms or forms have yet been created in grammatical gender languages. In Italy, for instance, proposals have been made to integrate gender-neutral forms into common practice. These methods include using the symbol * or the vowel schwa /ə/ or /u/ to replace the gendered suffixes *a, o, e, i*. However, these forms have been widely criticised and are seldom employed.

- **Natural gender languages** (Danish, Dutch, English, Norwegian, Swedish), where personal nouns are mostly gender-neutral and there are personal pronouns specific for each gender.

Most of the recommendations for the English language can be extended to all languages belonging to this group.

- **Genderless languages** (Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian), where there is no grammatical gender and no pronominal gender. Those languages do not generally need a particular strategy to be gender-inclusive.

3.2 Appendix 2: Professions and functions in the English language

Actor/actress	All genders, use <i>actress</i> only if the person's gender is relevant
Administrator	All genders
Attaché	All genders, <i>attachée</i> does not appear to exist nor does a gender-neutral version

Author	All genders
Business person/executive (plural: business people)	All genders, not <i>businessman</i> - use <i>businesswoman</i> only if the person's gender is relevant
Commissioner	All genders
Director, Director-General	All genders
Doctor	All genders
Editor	All genders
Engineer	All genders
Firefighter	All genders, not <i>fireman</i>
Fisherman/fishermen	<i>Fisher</i> and <i>fisherfolk</i> are not widely accepted
Flight attendant (plural: flight crew)	All genders, not <i>air hostess</i> or <i>stewardess</i>
Head/head teacher (of primary or secondary school)	All genders, not <i>headmaster/headmistress</i>
Intern	All genders
Interpreter	All genders
Journalist	All genders
Judge	All genders
Lawyer	All genders
Layperson (plural: lay people)	All genders, not <i>layman/laymen</i>
Lecturer	All genders
Manager	All genders
Mayor	All genders
Midwife	All genders, there is no accepted masculine or neutral version for this term
Nurse	All genders
Official	All genders
Parents/Caregivers	All genders, avoid <i>mother/father</i> unless the gender is relevant
Police officer	All genders, not <i>policeman/policewoman</i> unless the officer's gender is relevant
Politician	All genders
President	All genders
Priest	All genders, only use <i>woman priest</i> if relevant (<i>priestess</i> only in a historical context, e.g. ancient Rome)
Prime minister	All genders
Professor	All genders
Rector (of university)	All genders
Sales representative	All genders, not <i>salesman</i>
Scientist	All genders
Speaker	All genders
Teacher	All genders
Technician	All genders
Trainee	All genders
Translator	All genders
Usher	All genders, not <i>usherette</i>

Waiter/waitress	No gender-neutral term has been successfully proposed
Weather reporter/forecaster	All genders, not <i>weatherman</i>
Writer	All genders

Table 1 Professions and functions in the English language

3.3 Appendix 3: Glossary

Assigned sex (at birth): The sex assigned to a person at birth, with the main criterion being the baby's genitalia.*

Cisgender/Cis/Cis man or Cis woman: A term denoting a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth.

Cisnormativity: This refers to cultural and social attitudes implying that man and woman are the only existing genders.*

Deadname/deadnaming: The name that a transgender and/or non-binary person was given at birth and no longer uses upon transitioning. Deadnaming is using that name.*

Gender: This refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society associates with being a man or a woman. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Gender-exclusionary language: A language biased in favour of one gender, therefore discriminating against all other gender identities.

Gender expression: This refers to people's manifestation of their gender identity usually expressed through behaviour, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviours and characteristics typically associated with being a man or a woman.

Gender-fluid: Denoting or relating to a person who does not identify themselves as having a fixed gender.*

Gender identity: This refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.*

Gender-neutral language: A language that avoids any reference towards a specific gender.

Gender-nonconforming: A term for individuals whose gender identity does not fit into the societal expectations related to their assigned sex at birth.*

Gender-inclusive language: A language that includes everyone by avoiding expressions that perpetuate stereotypes, disregard or humiliate people of any gender.

Gender-sensitive language: A language that ensures that women and men are equally mentioned (and treated). This language is connected to the concept of equality between men and women, thus indirectly (or directly) perpetuating the gender binary.

Gender spectrum: The understanding that gender is not binary, but rather a spectrum of biological, mental and emotional traits that exist along a continuum.

Given name/legal name: The name that was given to a person at birth.*

Intersex: Individuals born with any of several variations in sex characteristics including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones or genitals that do not fit the typical definitions for male or female bodies.*

Non-binary/nonbinary gender: Any gender that falls outside of the binary system of man/woman.* It can be comprised within the umbrella term *transgender*.

Sex: A label that individuals are assigned at birth based on the appearance of the genitals they are born with, among other characteristics.

Sex characteristics: Genitals, chromosomes, hormones, body hair and other human body characteristics which all people have.*

Sexual orientation: How one finds oneself feeling drawn (or not drawn) to another person in a sexual and/or romantic way.*

Social name/chosen name: The name a transgender person uses, which is different from their given name.*

Transgender person: An individual whose gender identity is different than the sex assigned at birth (e.g. a transgender man is a person who lives as a man but was assigned female at birth). Transgender may be used as an umbrella term, and may include *non-binary gender* and *genderqueer*, among other identities outside the woman/man binary.

* Definitions from *Glossary of Sensitive Language for Internal and External Communications* (European Parliament) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/trad/etu/pdf/glossary_sensitive_language_2020_en.pdf, visited on 27/06/2023.

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