Using Non-Biased Personal Pronouns in Academic Writing[1]

Some people believe that language is nothing more than a simple tool for expression and that words convey little beyond their most basic, objective meanings. The reality, of course, is more complex than that: as human artifacts, words retain all of the stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory beliefs of their creators. More to the point, words do not only reflect historical biases, they can also be used to legitimize these biases—language used as a cudgel to enforce one narrow view of human existence and expression—and to reproduce these biases for successive generations.

One area of the English language that is particularly prone to expressing bias (whether consciously or unconsciously) is that of personal pronouns. Depending on how they are used, pronouns can promote unfortunate prejudices about sexual identities, a gender binary, male superiority over women, and more.

This handout will explain the specific nature of this problem and will offer several options for Silberman's faculty, staff, and students to employ in order to avoid potentially offensive or exclusionary language.

I. Personal Pronouns and Potential Bias

In English, personal pronouns—those words meant to represent people or things within our sentences—embody certain assumptions concerning sex and gender that may convey bias (whether intentional or otherwise) to the reader. Below are the main areas of concern:

1. Personal Pronouns and Sexism

The most notorious difficulty with personal pronouns in English is that the language does not currently employ an agreed-upon non-gendered third-person-singular pronoun for people, one that writers can use when gender is not specified or is unclear. Instead, we are left with a variety of options of varying palatability, some more useful than others but none truly satisfying on a rhetorical level. The solution promulgated in the late 18th century by grammarian Ann Fisher—using *he*, *him*, and *his* whenever gender is not specified—has been rightly rejected as sexist for over 20 years; however, there has been little to no consensus about what should replace it.

2. Personal Pronouns and the Reinforcement of a Gender Binary

There is also the question of whether pronouns *should* be used to express (and by doing so reinforce) the male/female sex/gender binary that so many of us use without a second thought. A small but growing number of people would reject attempts to force individuals through language to conform to a fixed or defined gender identity. Instead,

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these individuals would rather use language that no longer relies upon a socially constructed (and possibly discriminatory) set of terms.

II. Current Options and Their Respective Pros and Cons

Below are several options in current use that attempt to address the absence of a gender-neutral third-person-singular pronoun. Listed along with these options are the possible pros and cons associated with each.

1. *The Use of "She" Instead of "He"*

One solution in fairly common usage is to use "she" instead of "he" when gender is unspecified or in doubt.

Pros: This solution offers an understandable corrective to over 200 years of grammatical sexism.

Cons: Unfortunately, it is itself exclusionary language and is therefore a solution of limited efficacy if one's goal is to eliminate potential bias and be more inclusive.

2. *The Use of "He or She," "She or He," "He/She," "S/he," etc.*

A longstanding solution is to refer to both the feminine and masculine pronouns when gender is unspecified or in doubt.

Pros: This solution is certainly more inclusive than using either "he" or "she" alone.

Cons: Where to start? First, as implied above, this solution assumes a gender binary that is ultimately limiting. In addition, from a rhetorical perspective, it is an ungainly, even ugly, solution that adds unnecessary verbiage to our writing. Finally, it too can be accused of enforcing sexism; to wit, which pronoun goes first in this duo—"she" or "he"—and does this choice reflect or reinforce bias? Language is not supposed to be this difficult.

3. *The Use of "They" for the Singular Pronoun*

This solution involves using the plural words "they," "them," and "their" as replacements for the masculine and feminine singular pronouns whenever gender is unspecified or in doubt.

Pros: This solution is one that a person may already be using in their speech or writing, usually without a second thought or any real problems with comprehension on the part of the listener or reader (just as it was used in this very sentence). This solution also has the benefit of historical precedent: there are examples dating back at least as far as Chaucer in the 1300s in which "they" has been used for the singular pronoun. It is also gaining increasing acceptance in the modern age: just last year, *The Washington Post* announced the inclusion of this usage in its style guide. Last—but certainly not least—this solution avoids the gender binary of men/women.

Cons: However—and it is a big however—just because a solution is in common use and/or has historical precedent behind it does not mean it is the *best* solution. There are numerous problems with trying to use a plural pronoun to refer to a singular antecedent: (1) it simply does not make logical sense to do so and (2) in many cases, the reader will be confused by the logic of this seemingly arbitrary switch from the singular to the plural. Especially when working within the strictures of a style like APA that values accuracy and precision so highly, the ambiguity introduced by using the plural "they" to refer to a singular antecedent may seem unacceptable (especially when there are other, potentially better options).

4. *The Use of a Neologism Such as "Xe," "Per," "Hen," etc.*

This solution involves using a newly coined word to correct English's lack of a gender-neutral pronoun that can be used to refer to human beings. Some contenders that have been proposed over the years include the ones mentioned above ("hen" was even included in Sweden's official dictionary last year and has gained increasing acceptance in that country).

Pros: A widely agreed-upon switch to such a word in the United States and elsewhere would be a welcome development, helping to eliminate the inherent bias of current English pronoun usage. The move would also be consistent with other languages (such as Finnish) that do not have grammatical genders.

Cons: When it comes to pronouns, change comes slowly (if at all) and none of the newly coined words proposed thus far has gained much traction over the last 30-40 years. This is not to suggest that such a solution will not become an accepted solution in the future, only that this has not yet occurred; therefore, using a neologism such as "xe" may confuse a reader unfamiliar with its use.

5. *The Avoidance—Whenever Possible—of a Singular Antecedent (the Word Replaced by the Pronoun)*

In this solution, the matter of a gender-neutral third-person-singular pronoun is sidestepped by avoiding the use of singular antecedents when gender is not specified or is otherwise unclear; instead, a plural antecedent is used, allowing writers to use "they," "them," and "their" without confusion or contradiction. For example, rather than write "When a social worker access documentation for clients, they must insure confidentiality," it is less confusing (and more grammatically accurate) to write, "When social workers access client documentation, they must insure confidentiality."

Pros: This solution is often regarded by grammarians as the most preferable one for two reasons: (1) it does not require a potentially confusing contradiction between the singular and the plural and (2) it does not insist upon a potentially exclusionary gender binary.

Cons: If writers want to clearly differentiate between two different antecedents in the same sentence, it is often practical to make one of those antecedents singular and the other plural. In an instance such as this, it would obviously be impossible to avoid the use of the singular antecedent.

III. A Proposal for School-Wide Policies Concerning Pronoun Use

In order to offer writers the broadest possible latitude concerning this issue, the following policies concerning pronoun usage for students, faculty, and staff are proposed:

> 1. Whenever possible, it is recommended that writers use plural antecedents and pronouns when gender is not specified or is unclear (option number 5 from the list above). When referring to specific people, it is recommended that writers use whatever pronouns the subjects themselves use when self-identifying.

> 2. Concerning personal pronouns, writers may choose whichever of the above options they are comfortable with (or another option altogether that is not listed here if they so choose). No matter which method they choose, though, they are encouraged to be consistent in their use of this method within a document.

> 3. In order to avoid possible confusion on the part of the reader, writers are encouraged—but are not in any way required—to provide an explanatory footnote if they choose a pronoun method that is currently considered non-standard (such as options 3 and 4 in the previous list).[2] An explanatory footnote might also be useful if writing about specific people who self-identify using a pronoun method that differs from the one used elsewhere by the author.

Please Note: The objective of this document is to increase the options available to students, faculty, and staff when writing about themselves and others, allowing the greatest freedom of expression possible related to issues of sex and gender identity. The proposal reflects the reality of a changing world in which there is a greater opportunity for personal and public expression in this area than perhaps ever before, but it is not intended to force anyone to adopt a new method of expression that the person may be uncomfortable using.

Thank you for your attention to this proposal. If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to contact Christopher Hartley, Director of the Silberman Writing Program, at ch552@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-396-7857.

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[2] **Examples of Explanatory Footnotes**: In order to avoid potential bias, this paper uses the third-person-singular pronouns "xe," "xem," and "xer." *OR* In order to avoid potential bias, this paper uses "they," "them," and "their" for the third-person-singular pronoun when gender is unspecified or otherwise unclear.