

Word Choice

AVOID SEXIST LANGUAGE

Sexist language can occur when *he* or *she* is used exclusively to refer to an indefinite pronoun such as *anyone*, *everybody*, *someone* and *nobody*. It also occurs when a sex-specific noun is used to name a group with both male and female members. For example, calling mail carriers *mailmen* implies that only men deliver mail.

SEXISM WITH INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

Indefinite pronouns, such as *anybody*, *each*, *neither*, and *someone*, can be general in meaning and not refer to specific persons, places, or things. They are singular. Unfortunately, writers sometimes use masculine pronouns – *he*, *his*, and *him* – to refer to indefinite pronouns. Using only feminine pronouns to refer to indefinite pronouns is less frequent, but it too is sexist.

Three Ways to Avoid Sexism When Using Indefinite Pronouns

1. Use both masculine and feminine forms or remove the pronoun of reference.

Sexist: Everyone should cast **his** vote on Election Day.
Revised: Everyone should cast **his** or **her** vote on Election Day.
Revised: Everyone should vote on Election Day.

NOTE: To drop the pronoun, you might have to rewrite the sentence.

2. Replace the pronoun with *a*, *an*, or *the*.

Sexist: *Each employee reports to his supervisor.*
Revised: *Each employee reports to a supervisor.*

3. Use a plural noun and a pronoun.

Sexist: *Everyone should communicate with his professor.*
Revised: *Students should communicate with their professors.*

CAUTION: Make sure that the pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent – the word it refers to. Use singular pronouns with singular antecedents; use plural pronouns with plural antecedents.

SEXISM WITH GENERIC NOUNS

Generic nouns do not refer to a specific sex. Most nouns in English are generic. Exceptions include such words as *mother* and *father*. You can use the methods you just learned to avoid sexist language when using pronouns that refer to generic nouns, nouns that are neither male nor female.

Sexist: *A student must show his identification card at the library.*
Revised: *A student must show his or her identification card at the library.*
Revised: *A student must show an identification card at the library.*
Revised: *Students must show their identification cards at the library.*

Sexism also becomes a problem when you use female pronouns to refer to members of a group that contains both men and women.

Sexist: *A nurse must regularly update her skills.*
Revised: *Nurses must regularly update their skills.*

CAUTION: When correcting sexist language, make sure that pronouns agree with their antecedents.

Incorrect: *The student is required to bring their calculators to class.*
Revised: *Students are required to bring their calculators to class.*

NOTE: Another way to avoid sexism is to replace sex – specific terms with sex – neutral terms when appropriate. For example, you might easily substitute *firefighters* for *firemen*.

INCLUDE NECESSARY WORDS

While it is important to edit for redundancy and repetition, it is also important to make sure you have included all the words needed to make your writing clear, logical, and complete.

USING COMPLETE VERBS

Many verb forms contain more than one word. Sometimes you will have to add a helping word or a participle (a short word following a verb) to make the tense or meaning of your verb clear.

Incomplete: *Soon after I eaten dinner, I began to throw bits of spoiled meat.*
Complete: *Soon after I **had** eaten dinner, I began to throw **up** bits of spoiled meat.*

INCLUDING THE RELATIVE PRONOUN THAT

Sometimes including *that* is necessary, especially when you rephrase what others have said.

Not: *The psychologist told the audience children need both love and discipline.*
But: *The psychologist told the audience **that** children need both love and discipline.*

MAKING COMPARISONS CLEAR, COMPLETE, AND LOGICAL

1. Make sure your sentence compares like things; otherwise, it will be illogical.

Not: *The mountains of Switzerland are older than Colorado.*

But: *The mountains of Switzerland are older than **those** of Colorado.*

The first sentence is illogical; it compares unlike things – *mountains* and *Colorado*. The second is logical; it compares like things – *mountains* and *mountains (those of Colorado)*.

2. When you compare people, places, or things, show that they belong to the group to which they are being compared. To do so, include words such as *other* or *else*.

Not: *A Ferrari is more expensive than most cars.*

But: *A Ferrari is more expensive than most **other** cars.*

CREATE AN APPROPRIATE TONE

Tone is the style in which you express yourself. Your tone may vary depending upon purpose and audience. For example, if you are writing a letter to a friend, you might use an informal tone and include slang, jargon, colloquialisms, and contractions. If you are writing a college essay, on the other hand, you will want to use a formal tone.

To maintain a formal tone, avoid slang, jargon, and colloquialisms. Also, choose language carefully and include only idiomatic expressions.

AVOID SLANG

Slang is language that has a private and often short – lived meaning. Slang can be very powerful, but it is often inexact and is usually understood by only a select group.

For example, teenagers often use words and their parents have never heard of and that are not found in contemporary newspapers, textbooks, and the like.

Slang: *When the dude split, he left the chick with a kid and no bread.*

Formal: *When the man left, he abandoned the woman with a child and no money.*

AVOIDING JARGON EXCEPT WITH SPECIAL AUDIENCES

Jargon is language used by experts in a particular field. It includes technical words, new compounds, and familiar words used in a unique way. Jargon is appropriate as long as your readers are familiar with the field from which it comes. But jargon can make your writing complicated and unclear to those who are unfamiliar with such language.

Jargon: *After booting up the computer and activating the printer, Amie made hard copies of his business correspondence.*

Familiar: *After turning on the computer and the printer, Amie printed his business letters.*

AVOIDING COLLOQUIALISMS

Colloquial expressions, while not always incorrect, are informal and more appropriate in spoke conversation among friends than in formal writing.

Colloquial: *I found the puppy sleeping back of the couch.*

Formal: *I found the puppy sleeping behind the couch.*

USE IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

An *idiom* is an expression whose meaning often has little to do with the individual meanings of the words it contains. An idiom must be understood as a unit, and its meaning can be learned only through experience.

Say you wrote, "I won't put up with his rudeness." You mean that you won't tolerate his rudeness. But this meaning cannot be arrived at by translating each of the three words in the idiom *put up with*. You can use idioms in formal writing, but you must use them correctly.

Not: *We are angry at our landlord.*

But: *We are angry with our landlord.*

COMMON IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

NOT

afraid on
agree to (an opinion)
angry on

arrive to (a place)
at peace in (oneself)
comply to
conform on (a rule)
contend against
content against
depend in
die with (a disease)
different than
equal with
frightened of
get in (a car)

impatient at (a person)
inferior than

BUT

afraid of
agree with (an opinion)
angry at (a situation)
angry with (a person)
arrive at/in (a place)
at peace with (oneself)
comply with
conform to (a rule)
contend with
content with
depend on
die of/from (a disease)
different from
equal to
frightened by
get on (a car)
get in (a plane, bus, train)
get on (a plane, bus, train)
impatient with (a person)
inferior to

listen on/at	listen to
live in (a street)	live on (a street)
live in (an address)	live at (an address)
live at (a city)	live in (a city)
look to (a picture)	look at (a picture)
married with (someone)	married to (someone)
park on (a driveway)	park in (a driveway)
park in (the street)	park on (the street)
partake in	partake of
participate on	participate in
prior than	prior to
report in	report on
superior than	superior to
tired with	tired of
wait for (a customer)	wait on (a customer)
wait on (a letter)	wait for (a letter)

AVOID CLICHÉS

A cliché is an expression that has been overused. As a result, it sounds stale and dull. In fact, as soon as you begin to hear or read a cliché, you can predict how it will end.

Read the following sentences and try to figure out how the cliché in them will end:

She baked a cake that was as light as a _____.

Jason's remark was right on _____.

Janice, you have hit the nail _____.

A cliché is an expression that has been overused. As a result, it sounds slate and dull. In fact, as soon as

After being crushed, the can lay flat as a _____.

Watch for cliché as you rewrite the drafts of your papers. Make one last check for cliché as you edit your final draft. Trust your instincts to come up with alternatives that are clearer, more appealing, less wordy, and often more specific than cliché are:

A LIST OF Cliché

acid test	hit the sack
as good as done	hot potato
as the crow flies	keep your shirt on
at all costs	ladder of success
better half	like the plague
bit the dust	little lady

breaking my neck	old hat
broken record	on your own
clear as mud	paid your dues
cold, hard facts	passed away
cool as a cucumber	picture perfect
dark horse	pure as snow
dead as a doornail	rest assured
drunk as a skunk	rite of passage
early bird	sacred cow
easy for you to say	short and sweet
edge of the seat	sick as a dog
face the music	sink or swim
fall on deaf ears	stone cold sober
fly like an eagle	stone's throw
foaming at the mouth	strong as an ox
going places	tighten our belts
green with envy	to the point
grinning from ear to ear	turn for the worse
healthy as a horse	white as a ghost
hit the deck	

USE THE CORRECT WORD – A GLOSSARY OF USAGE

Sometimes writers use words whose meaning they don't fully understand. This practice can lead to sentences that are incorrect, unclear, or both. To make sure that the word you are using means what you think it does, check its meaning in the dictionary.

Words Often Confused or Misused

accept	The community college will accept any applicant who has a high school diploma.
except	My nephew likes all vegetables except broccoli.
advice	The value of good advice is not immediately recognized.
advise	The faculty member advised the student to drop the course.
affect	Automobile emissions affect the earth's atmosphere.
effect	The effects of global warming are difficult to measure.
all right	The children were all right.
alright	This word does not exist.
alot	This word does not exist.
a lot	A lot of fans began shouting when the concert was delayed.
allot	The manager allotted the parking spaces according to seniority.
altogether	The dancer was altogether brilliant in her performance.

all together	The campaign workers were all together at the rally.
among	Among the candidates, he was the most popular.
between	Dan's choice was between dropping out of college and finishing the semester.
another words	This form does not exist. (See <i>in other words</i> .)
anymore	Barry does not work at that restaurant anymore.
any more	Mia ate two pancakes and didn't want any more.
are	Before you leave this evening, check whether our hours are posted
hour	on next week's schedule.
our	
axe	The axe is missing its handle.
ask	Don't ever be afraid to ask the teacher a question. The first is a tool; the second means "to request." Do not confuse them.
beyond	Giselle's beauty is beyond comparison.
be on	It's wise to be on time for job interviews.
brake	The sign warned drivers to brake.
break	The bartender washed the glasses carefully in order not to break them.
breath	After running, Jamal was out of breath.
breathe	The scuba instructor showed us how to breathe under water.
choose	If you choose to study electronics, you must take several math courses. [present tense]
chose	Mary Beth chose to spend last weekend at the ocean. [past tense]
cite	In reports, one must cite all research.
sight	The cabin came into sight.
site	A construction site is full of hazards.
cloths	Soft cloths work best for polishing a car.
clothes	Al spends Saturday mornings washing clothes.
complement	His flowered tie does not complement his checkered jacket.
compliment	He complimented us on our performance.
could of	This form does not exist.

could have	Tim could have been a manager.
desert	Few animals can survive in the desert as well as the camel can.
dessert	You can have ice cream for dessert.
genes	Your physical characteristics are passed on to you by your parents through their genes.
jeans	I ripped my favorite pair of jeans.
hang	She wants to hang the pictures in the den.
hung	The sail hung loosely when the wind died.
heros	We always have heros for dinner on Mondays.
heroes	Children often think of athletes as heroes.
in	In other words, the choice is not as easy as it appears to be.
otherwords	
irregardless	This word does not exist.
regardless	They decided to buy a new car regardless of the cost.
its'	This form does not exist.
its	The college will hold its graduation Thursday.
it's	Since storm clouds are rolling in, it's likely to rain before evening.
knew	Ramona knew the secret password.
new	The new equipment will allow surgeons to perform the operation in less time.
know	His brother asked, "Do you know him?"
no	"No," he replied.
now	The judges will now announce the winners of the contest.
lead	The mayor will lead the marchers downtown.
lead	Many older buildings are contaminated with lead paint.
led	The performer led the audience in a sing-along.
loose	Amy prefers loose clothing when it is humid.
lose	I predict the team will lose on Saturday.
maybe	Maybe he will win the lottery.
may be	The tests may be inaccurate, but the doctors are still worried.
passed	With help from a tutor, he passed the exam.
past	Alexis didn't consider her husband's past before she married him.

principal	The principal closed the school at noon.
principal	Dehydration is the principal cause of heatstroke.
principle	Religious principles are important to many people throughout the world.
should of	This form does not exist.
should have	Sharon should have come home earlier.
stationary	The table is stationary; it can't be moved.
stationery	She wrote the letter on expensive stationery.
than	Jodi and Bill arrived earlier than the other ticket buyers.
then	Read the instructions; then assemble the bicycle.
their	Their house is on the corner.
there	Stand there if you want to see the president.
they're	They're too tired to stay awake.
to	To vote, you have to register at city hall.
too	Since the classroom was too cold, the professor canceled the lecture.
two	The two of them decided to attend the reception.
try to	Bob's mother should try to understand his problem.
try and	Avoid using this form; it is wordy.
whose	Whose car are we taking to the dance?
who's	Who's going to the dance with Brandy?
would of	This form does not exist.
would have	Walt would have canceled his appointment.
your	Someone found your purse in the college center.
you're	You're lucky that your money was not stolen.

Sample Quiz questions:

1. Choose the word or phrases that uses correct standard English to complete the following sentence.

The child who had _____ was soon revived.

- a. passed out
- b. passed over
- c. passed on.

Answer: a. passed out

2. Choose the word or phrase that uses correct standard English to complete the following sentence:

The car _____ crashed into a large truck if the driver hadn't swerved.

- a. would have
- b. would of
- c. would a

Answer: a. would have