



Language shapes reality

A compendium for inclusive, diversity-sensitive and appreciative language

Inclusive, diversity-sensitive language is important because...

...language influences our thoughts and assessment of reality; what mental image do you get when you read "three engineers meet for lunch"¹?

...statistically speaking, ~870 women and ~20 non-binary persons² are in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering.

...such language actively contributes to equality.³

...conscious language use can help avoid misunderstandings and thus ensure better relationships.

A) Gender-inclusive Language

1. Gender-neutral formulations

Fortunately, English no longer has grammatical gender so most of its nouns, adjectives and pronouns are not gender-specific. However, there are some issues to consider when using gender-neutral language. For example, the word "men" should not be used synonymously with "people" or "humanity", because it can be misinterpreted. Clear communication requires writers to be precise. We strongly recommend using neutral formulations. Some possibilities for bias-free formulations are listed below:

a) Use plural pronouns

- use „they“ as a singular pronoun
(instead of "he" or "she")

The combination of female and male personal pronoun (e.g. "he and she" or "he*she") is critical in that it excludes people who are non-binary or intersex. Besides being the plural pronoun, "they" has sometimes also been used as a neutral singular pronoun in the past and has gained usage in the past few years.

You can use "they" whenever the sex/gender of a person is unknown or irrelevant.

b) Try to avoid gendered generic nouns

- person, individual
(instead of "man")
- first-year students
(instead of „freshman“)

c) Use gender neutral forms of occupations

- chair, chairperson
(instead of "chairman/chairwoman")

d) Describe the action without including the "doer"

- Registration for the workshop is possible by 15.12.2021 via TUMonline.
(instead of: "Freshmen have to register for the workshop via TUMonline by 15.12.2021").

¹ <https://www.welt.de/kmpkt/article194491179/Generisches-Maskulinum-Warum-es-nicht-ausreicht-Frauen-mitzumeinen.html>

² <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/technical-note-measuring-gender-identity>

³ Klein, Josef (2004): Der Mann als Prototyp des Menschen – immer noch? Empirische Studien zum generischen Maskulinum und zur feminin-maskulinen Paarform. In: Eichhoff-Cyrus, Karin M. (ed.): Adam, Eva und die Sprache. Beiträge zur Geschlechterforschung. Thema Duden Bd. 5. Mannheim, 292-307.



e) Address the person directly or use an imperative

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(instead of: "Freshman have to register for the workshop on TUMonline by 15.12.2021").

2. Avoid assumptions

Our understanding of maleness/femaleness is culturally shaped and linked to names, voices and appearance. When working in interdisciplinary, international teams, strictly speaking, we can never know a person's gender unless said person has told us it. Therefore, avoid gendered language e.g. titles such as Mr/Ms/Mrs or Sir/Madam and gendered pronouns, unless you definitely know a person's gender. You can ask others about their preferred pronouns and disclose your pronouns and preferred title to others; this will help your colleagues feel comfortable in disclosing theirs.

3. Honorifics

"Dear Mx (/ 'mɪks/ or / 'mʌks/), Doe"

is polite and does not require assigning Mr., Mrs. or Ms to people we do not know. Just like the honorific "Ms," which provides women an alternative to being identified by their marital status, "Mx" provides individuals an alternative to being identified by their gender.

Gender-assignment can also be avoided by using full names like

"Dear Evan Hansen";

the informal version would be

"Hello John".

When communicating with a group of people, use plural forms, such as

***"Dear students" or
"Dear colleagues".***

The combination of female and male form (e.g. "Dear Ladies and Gentlemen") is problematic because it excludes people who are non-binary or intersex. This can also be problematic when writing to a company. The best thing is to write to a position or the whole team:

***"Dear purchasing manager"
"Dear diversity-team of ***".***



B) Diversity-sensitive language

Diversity-sensitive language not only takes into account different genders, but all people, regardless of their specific characteristics. This includes people with different skin tones. A suitable formulation is

„People/Person of Color“.

This expression is appropriate as it includes people of various skin colors and at the same time implies that people “without color”, i.e. White people, don’t share the same experiences and benefit from privileges most of the time. For a successful diversity-sensitive language, it is also possible to use the specific terms for the particular group one wants to address.

When addressing people of an ethnic group, it would make sense to also be gender-inclusive at the same time: Use plural forms or for example

“**Latinx**” (Instead Of “Latino” Or “Latina”).

Please be careful when talking about disabilities. Some expressions label people as weak or lacking something, which should be avoided. An explanatory list with guidelines can be found on the following homepage, the [Disability Language Style Guide](#).

C) Creating inclusive and diverse content

In addition to the language itself, the content of written material and websites should also be regularly reflected upon. This content includes not only texts, but also images. The following questions might help to reflect upon this subject:

- Is my content non-discriminatory?
- Are my formulations consistently sensitive to diversity?
- Are diverse people visible - linguistically and pictorially?
- Are stereotypical attributions or clichés used?
- Is (only) heteronormativity reflected?
- Are people with disabilities included?