



## Gender-neutral Language

If you use certain kinds of correct grammar, are you are sexist? (In this case, *sexist* is one who believes that men are more important than women.) Today some correct grammar is called sexist language. For example,

Everyone used little scoops and plastic bags while walking his dog in the Bark Park.

That sentence is grammatically correct. Why? Because *everyone* is a singular pronoun—it's true!—and requires a *his*, not a *their*. But because both men and women likely were at the Bark Park, *their* is commonly used today in order to avoid using *he*, which to modern ears excludes all females.

Until a few generations ago, women heard words like *he*, *mankind*, and *chairman* and applied them to either sex. This is not the case today; many women like to be included in the language. What can a writer do? Obviously, using correct grammar does not make a writer sexist. In fact, from now on, let's not use the term *sexist language* but *gender-neutral language*. Much formal writing today demands this type of language.

The doggy example above can be expressed many ways. Most writers and speakers would use the sentence below because it fixes the gender problem; however, it also creates a grammar mistake. The number of the subject and the pronoun do not match:

**Singular subject, plural pronoun:** Everyone used little scoops and plastic bags while walking their dogs in the Bark Park.

The solutions below are cumbersome but used frequently:

Everyone used little scoops and plastic bags while walking his/her dog in the Bark Park.

Everyone used little scoops and plastic bags while walking his or her dog in the Bark Park.

While this fixes the gender and grammar problems, it doesn't make things easy to read. It's as bulky and uncomfortable as a large root on a hiking trail, and reading it aloud is just plain awkward. Also, it often puts the male pronoun before the female one, something that still lacks neutrality.

These two sentences fix both the gender and the grammar issues:

**Singular subject, no pronoun:** Everyone used little scoops and plastic bags while walking dogs in the Bark Park.

**Plural subject, plural pronoun:** Visitors used little scoops and plastic bags while walking their dogs in the Bark Park.

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Ah, those are much better. Grammarians and people of both genders now can be happy. The pronoun matches the antecedent to which it refers, and the language is gender neutral.

Gender-neutral language sometimes lacks the punch and individuality of former language usage. The following sentence is not gender neutral, but it is direct and straightforward, and it says something very definite:

No doctor should abandon his compassion.

You may have a picture in your mind of this particular doctor (male?). Using gender-neutral language would change the sentence in these ways:

No doctor should abandon his compassion. [Direct, personal, urgent]

No doctor should abandon compassion. [Less personal or specific]

No doctor should abandon their compassion. [Less personal or specific, grammatically incorrect]

Doctors should not abandon their compassion. [Indirect, impersonal, less urgent, lacks punch]

The changes, admittedly, are subtle, but they are there. Work hard to keep your nonfiction writing direct and specific, even while using gender-neutral language.

Some writers choose to use the masculine pronouns in one passage or set of paragraphs and the feminine pronouns in an alternating passage or set of paragraphs. One passage is written as though about a boy; the next, about a girl. This may work well in some situations. Some readers find this confusing while others consider it refreshing. In your own writing, if you maintain male pronouns in one passage and female pronouns in the next, read it out loud to determine whether it makes sense and flows well.

Gender-neutral language also uses words such as *mail carrier* instead of *mailman*, and *humanity* instead of *mankind*.

Writers most often have trouble using gender-neutral language when the subject of the sentence is a singular, indefinite pronoun (as in the case with *everyone*). On the next page is a list of indefinite pronouns that are singular. Any surprises in it?

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## Singular Indefinite Pronouns

each  
every  
either  
neither  
everyone  
someone  
anyone  
no one  
everybody  
somebody  
anybody  
nobody  
everything  
something  
anything  
nothing

All the indefinite pronouns in this list are singular antecedents that deserve singular pronouns later in the sentence (as the doggy park example shows) and singular verbs.

A word about gender-neutral Bibles is fitting here. When selecting a Bible, you will want to know whether you are buying a translation from the oldest texts or whether you are buying a paraphrase loosely based on original and other texts. **No** Bible translated from the original texts is gender-neutral. The original language is not gender-neutral. It uses *sons* instead of *children*. It states *When a man*, not *When a person*. Understand these differences as you choose your next Bible.

**Now it's your turn:** Below are sentences that contain singular indefinite pronouns or singular subjects. First, correct them according to good grammar (using "he" when necessary). Next, rewrite them by using gender-neutral language. These sentences can be fixed in many correct ways. Use your imagination.

1. Every child has a right to eat their breakfast before going to school.

2. Each singer wanted to ace their audition.



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9. Anybody who sees a felony being committed can say, “Citizen’s arrest,” and have their voice count.

10. On Monday, each member of the Spanish Club is to bring their food made from a recipe in a Spanish cookbook.

11. Someone knows the truth about this accident, but they aren’t coming forward.

12. Anyone who still believes in phrenology needs to have their head examined.

13. A trapeze artist knows how important it is to be able to trust their partner.

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14. For a student to schedule his/her six hours of behind-the-wheel instructions, he/she must have his/her permit from the license branch.



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**Answers:** Possible answers are below. The first answer in each set is correct grammatically; the second is gender neutral.

1. Every child has a right to eat their breakfast before going to school.

*Every child has a right to eat his breakfast before going to school.*

*Every child has a right to eat breakfast before going to school.*

2. Each singer wanted to ace their audition.

*Each singer wanted to ace his audition.*

*Each singer wanted to ace the audition.*

*All the singers wanted to ace their auditions.*

3. Everybody but Anne did their homework.

*Everybody but Anne did his homework.*

*Everybody but Anne did the homework.*

4. Neither firefighter could find their boots.

*Neither firefighter could find his boots.*

*Both firefighters could not find their boots.*

5. Nobody should have to eat their lunch alone.

*Nobody should have to eat his lunch alone.*

*Nobody should have to eat lunch alone.*

6. No clown would forget to wear their big, floppy shoes.

*No clown would forget to wear his big, floppy shoes.*

*No clown would forget to wear big, floppy shoes.*

7. Either sister will do an excellent job because they are so proficient.

*Either sister will do an excellent job because she is so proficient.*

*Both sisters will do an excellent job because they are so proficient.*



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8. Every cheerleader will try on their new uniforms at 3:00 p.m.

*Every cheerleader will try on her new uniform at 3:00 p.m.*

*Cheerleaders will try on their new uniforms at 3:00 p.m.*

9. Anybody who sees a felony being committed can say, “Citizen’s arrest,” and have their voice count.

*Anybody who sees a felony being committed can say, “Citizen’s arrest,” and have his voice count.*

*People who see a felony being committed can say, “Citizen’s arrest,” and have their voice count.*

10. On Monday, each member of the Spanish Club is to bring their food made from a recipe in a Spanish cookbook.

*On Monday, each member of the Spanish Club is to bring his food made from a recipe in a Spanish cookbook.*

*On Monday, members of the Spanish Club are to bring their food made from a recipe in a Spanish cookbook.*

11. Someone knows the truth about this accident, but they aren’t coming forward.

*Someone knows the truth about this accident, but he isn’t coming forward.*

*Someone knows the truth about this accident but isn’t coming forward.*

12. Anyone who still believes in phrenology needs to have their head examined.

*Anyone who still believes in phrenology needs to have his head examined.*

*People who still believe in phrenology need to have their heads examined.*

13. A trapeze artist knows how important it is to be able to trust their partner.

*A trapeze artist knows how important it is to be able to trust his partner.*

*Trapeze artists know how important it is to be able to trust their partners.*

14. For a student to schedule his/her six hours of behind-the-wheel instructions, he/she must have his/her permit from the license branch.

*For a student to schedule his six hours of behind-the-wheel instructions, he must have his permit from the license branch.*

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*Before students can schedule their six hours of behind-the-wheel instructions, they must have their permit from the license branch.*