

Achieving Equity Through Gender-Neutral Language

“Language is our most common tool.
It not only mirrors our thoughts, it also shapes them.”
—Anonymous

According to the Mid-Atlantic Center for Sex Equity, studies with elementary, secondary and college students show that when a supposed generic term such as “mankind” is used, people envision males even when the content implies both men and women. In another study, students illustrated supposedly generic references (i.e. “urban man”) with male pictures more than they did when the references were gender neutral (i.e. “urban life”). Other research has shown that when male generic nouns and pronouns are used to describe jobs, female students describe the jobs as less attractive to them than when sex neutral terms are used.

Guidelines for Eliminating Sexist Language

- Don't use masculine pronouns (he, his, him, himself) generically. Instead, make the subject plural or use such terms as “technician” or “flight attendant.”
- When addressing the class, use terminology that includes both women and men. Avoid such phrases as “you guys” or “ladies.”
- Whenever possible, use substitutions for words that begin or end with “man” (i.e. chairman = chair, workman = worker, foreman = supervisor).
- Avoid the use of the word “girl” unless referring to a female child.
- Use parallel terms for women and men (i.e. men/women, girls/boys).
- Refer to women by name in the same way that you refer to men.
- Don't refer to women in terms of their roles as wife, mother, sister, or daughter unless the context indicates these roles are significant.
- Avoid placing either sex in a special category by saying “female welder” or “male nurse.”
- Eliminate gratuitous physical descriptions.
- When talking about occupations, use language that does not reinforce limited views of men's and women's career choices. For example, “The chemist works with compounds that will enable *her* to...” or “The dental hygienist prepares *his* equipment by....”

Classroom Activities

- Ask students to brainstorm and suggest gender neutral alternatives to sex-biased job titles (i.e. fireman, mailman, stewardess, housewife).
- Ask students to illustrate what they visualize when they hear sex-biased language. Compare the illustrations to images produced by gender-neutral language.
- Ask students to discuss various ways in which language affects our perception of reality.

Source: Michigan Center for Career and Technical Education, Michigan State University