
Words and Expressions to Avoid

You should read this chapter if you need to review or learn about

Do I Need
to Read
This Chapter?



- Avoiding biased language
- Rewriting clichés
- Replacing overblown words with direct expressions

Get Started



Every time you write, you want to get your message across clearly. The words you choose enable you to achieve your purpose. In this chapter, you'll learn how to avoid biased language, replace overworked expressions with fresh ones, and replace stuffy language with clear speech. This will help you create an honest, direct, and effective writing style.

Use Nonbiased Language

Language is a powerful tool: We use it deliberately to shape our thoughts and experiences, yet our language can shape us. You wouldn't discriminate against people based on their race, disability, or age—so neither should your words. Therefore, always use *bias-free language*. This type of language uses words and phrases that don't discriminate on the basis of gender, physical condition, age, race, gender, or any other quality. That way, your readers will be able to concentrate on *what* you say rather than on *how* you say it.

1. Refer to a group by the term it prefers.

Language changes, so stay on the cutting edge. For example, a hundred years ago, black people were called *colored*. Fifty years later, the term *Negro* was used. Today, the preferred terms are *African American* and *black*. Here are some other changes to know:

- *Asian* is preferred over *Oriental*.
- *Inuit* is preferred over *Eskimo*.
- *Latino* is the preferred designation for males with Central and Latin American backgrounds.
- *Latina* is the preferred designation for females with Central and Latin American backgrounds.
- Only give someone's race if it is relevant to your narrative. Further, if you do mention one person's race, be sure to mention everyone else's.

Quick Tip



Members of the same ethnic or religious group sometimes call each other by denigrating racial terms. Don't go there.

2. Focus on people, not their conditions.

Actor Lou Ferrigno (“The Incredible Hulk”) is 60 percent deaf. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was paralyzed from the waist down as a result of polio. Singer Neil Young and actor Danny Glover have epilepsy. Singer Ray Charles is blind. Actor Tom Cruise and actor-singer Cher have dyslexia, a processing disorder that impedes reading.

People with disabilities can be defined broadly as those with limitations in human actions or activities due to physical, emotional, or mental impairments. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 49 million Americans have a disability; the number with a severe disability is 24.1 million. Expect the number to increase as the population ages. Therefore, it is important to know the accepted ways of referring to people with illnesses.

| | |
|------------|---------------------------------|
| Biased: | the deaf |
| Nonbiased: | people with hearing impairments |
| Biased: | AIDS patients |
| Nonbiased: | people being treated for AIDS |

- Biased: the mentally retarded
 - Nonbiased: people with intellectual disabilities
 - Biased: abnormal, afflicted, struck down
 - Nonbiased: atypical
3. Avoid language that discriminates against older people.
- Biased: old people, geezers, aged
 - Nonbiased: Senior citizen, mature person
4. Avoid sexist language.
- “Hey, babe, you are one foxy chick.”
 - “He has such a male ego!”

We all know that such blatant sexist language and attitudes aren’t acceptable in today’s world. But sexist language can be much less obvious—and every bit as offensive.

Sexist language assigns qualities to people on the basis of their gender. It reflects prejudiced attitudes and stereotypical thinking about the sex roles and traits of both men and women and so discriminates against people by limiting what they can do.

Further, the law is increasingly intolerant of biased documents and hostile work environments. Since federal law forbids discrimination on the basis of gender, people writing *anything*—but especially policy statements, grant proposals, or any other official documents—must be very careful not to use any language that could be considered discriminatory. Otherwise, they’re just looking for a lawsuit.

Nonsexist language treats both sexes neutrally. It does not make assumptions about the proper gender for a job, nor does it assume that men take precedence over women. Here are some guidelines to help you use nonsexist language when you write and speak.

- Avoid using *man, he, or him* to refer to both men and women.
- Sexist: A person could lose *his* way in this huge store.
 - Nonbiased: A person could get lost in this huge store.

or

You could lose your way in this huge store.

- Avoid expressions that exclude one sex. Here are some of the most offensive examples and acceptable alternatives:

| Sexist | Nonbiased |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| chairman | chair, moderator |
| common man | average person |
| congressman | senator, representative |
| female intuition | intuition |
| female lawyer | lawyer |
| fireman | firefighter |

Continues

| Sexist | Nonbiased |
|-----------------|---|
| foreman | supervisor |
| male ego | ego |
| male nurse | nurse |
| mankind | humanity, people |
| old wives' tale | superstition |
| policeman | police officer |
| postman | postal carrier, letter carrier |
| stewardess | flight attendant |
| waitress | server |
| workman | worker, employee, or the specific job title |

Quick Tip



Watch for phrases that suggest women and men behave in stereotypical ways, such as “cries like a woman,” “thinks like a man,” “man’s work,” “rowdy boys.” Expunge such phrases from your writing and speech.

- Use the correct courtesy title.
Use *Mr.* for men and *Ms.* for women, with these two exceptions: In a business setting, professional titles take precedence over *Mr.* and *Ms.* For example, on the job, I am referred to as *Dr. Rozakis* rather than *Ms. Rozakis*.
- Always use the title the person prefers.
Some women prefer *Miss* to *Ms.* If you are not sure what courtesy title to use, check in a company directory or on previous correspondence to see how the person prefers to be addressed. Also pay attention to the way people introduce themselves.
- Use plural pronouns and nouns whenever possible.
Sexist: A good reporter needs to verify *her* sources.
Nonbiased: Good reporters need to verify *their* sources.

Replace Clichés with Fresh Expressions

As you read this section, be sure to roll out the red carpet, keep your eyes peeled, your fingers crossed, and your head above water and you may be able to keep up with the Joneses.

But that’s only if you’re on the ball, beam, go, level, and up-and-up, rather than on the fly, fence, ropes, rocks, or lam. Or you can just go fry an egg.

The previous paragraph was chock-full of *clichés*, descriptive phrases that have lost their effectiveness through overuse. If you have heard the same words and phrases over and over, so has your reader. Replace clichés with fresh, new descriptions. If you can’t think of a way to rewrite the phrase to make it new, delete it completely.

| Cliché | Meaning |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| clean as a hound’s tooth | very clean |
| cry uncle | give up |
| get cold feet | afraid to proceed |
| make your hair stand on end | terrified |
| on the carpet | reprimanded |
| on the fritz | broken |
| on the lam | fleeing |
| on the make | eager for financial or sexual gain |
| rain or shine | regardless |
| soft as silk | soft |

Remember, if you have a tough row to hoe, be a tough nut to crack and tough it out. Truth will win out and you can turn over a new leaf, turn the tables, other cheek, or the corner. Under a cloud? Not up to par, scratch, or snuff? Use your head; it’s all water over the dam. After all: the world is your oyster; you can bet your bottom dollar!

Avoid Empty Language

When’s the last time someone tried to sell you an “underground condominium”? It’s the newest term for a grave. See any “personal manual data bases” being hawked on the home shopping network? They’re what we used to call calendars.

These phrases are artificial, evasive language. Each one pretends to communicate but really doesn’t. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant become pleasant. It shifts responsibility and deliberately aims to distort and deceive.

| Phrase | Meaning |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| greenmail | economic blackmail |
| involuntarily leisured | fired |
| mechanically separated meat | salvaged meat |
| nonpositively terminated | fired |
| outplaced | fired |
| revenue enhancement | tax increase |
| sea legs | pressed seafood |
| takeover artists | corporate raiders |
| unauthorized withdrawal | robbery |
| vertically challenged | a short person |

Here are some additional examples of evasive language:

When writers use this kind of language, they hide the truth. Always use language truthfully.

1. Avoid inflated language.

Inflated language makes the ordinary seem extraordinary.

“automotive internists” for car mechanics

“vertical transportation corps” for elevator operators

Now, I’m all for giving someone praise (and even a fancy job title), but inflated language is fundamentally dishonest because it manipulates the truth. Therefore, write and speak clearly and directly.

2. Use euphemisms with care.

What do all the following expressions have in common?

- She’s between jobs.
- He has to see a man about a horse.
- He cashed in his chips.
- She’s pushing up daisies.
- She’s a woman of a certain age.

These sentences are all *euphemisms*, inoffensive or positive words or phrases used to avoid a harsh reality. Euphemisms are a type of evasive language because they cloud the truth. You find them in all potentially embarrassing situations, such as losing a job, bathroom activities, dying, nudity, body parts, sex, and aging.

- Avoid euphemisms if they obscure your meaning. Most of the time, euphemisms drain meaning from truthful writing. As a result, they can make it difficult for your readers and listeners to understand your meaning.
- Use euphemisms to spare someone’s feelings, especially in delicate situations. You *should* use euphemisms when you are trying to spare someone’s feelings or out of concern for a recognized social custom, as when you say, “I am sorry your sister passed away” rather than “I am sorry your sister died.”

3. Avoid bureaucratic language.

Bureaucratic language is wordy and unnecessarily complex. As a result, it becomes meaningless because it is evasive and wordy.

Original: The internal memorandum previously circulated should be ignored and disregarded and instead replaced by the internal memorandum sent before the previous one was sent. The memorandum presently at the current time being held by the appropriate personnel should be combined with the previous one to call attention to the fact that the previous one should be ignored by the reader.

Revision: Replace the first memorandum you received with the one that followed it. Please attach this notice to the canceled version.

Use the following checklist to identify empty language in all its forms. As you reread your own writing to eliminate empty language, ask yourself these questions:

- What do my words mean?
- To whom is the remark addressed?
- Under what conditions is the remark being made?
- What is my intent?
- What is the result of the remarks?
- Which words will help me express my ideas most clearly and directly?



- ✓ Use bias-free language.
- ✓ Replace clichés with fresh expressions.
- ✓ Avoid empty language.
- ✓ Write simply and directly.



QUESTIONS

True-False Questions

1. Always use bias-free language, language that uses words and phrases that don't discriminate on the basis of gender, physical condition, age, race, gender, or any other quality.
2. Today, the term *Oriental* is preferred over *Asian*.
3. Likewise, *Latina* is the preferred designation for males with Central and Latin American backgrounds.
4. Only give someone's race if it is relevant to your narrative. Further, if you do mention one person's race, be sure to mention everyone else's.
5. The nonbiased term is "the deaf"; the biased term is "people with hearing impairments."
6. Sexist language assigns qualities to people on the basis of their gender.
7. Sexist language discriminates only against women, not men.
8. Nonsexist language treats both sexes neutrally.

9. Avoid using *man*, *he*, or *him* to refer to both men and women.
10. In a business setting, professional titles do not take precedence over *Mr.* and *Ms.*
11. To make your language nonbiased, use plural pronouns and nouns whenever possible.
12. If you want your documents to sound important, use a little inflated language, words and expressions that make the ordinary seem extraordinary.
13. Avoid euphemisms if they obscure your meaning.
14. Use euphemisms to spare someone's feelings, especially in delicate situations.
15. *Clichés* are wordy and unnecessarily complex. As a result, clichés become meaningless because they are evasive and wordy.

Completion Questions

Rewrite each sentence to remove the bias.

1. We need more manpower.
2. Mrs. Yu looks remarkably good for her age.
3. These stockings are available in black, suntan, and flesh color.
4. I see that Marci forgot to bring her lunch. She's acting a little blonde today.
5. Mrs. Clinton and George W. Bush met to discuss strategy.
6. Pat really went on the warpath when her son stayed out past his curfew.
7. The club now admits women and other minorities.
8. Women can leave their children at the daycare center.
9. Win a fabulous vacation: a day at the spa for her and 18 holes of golf for him.
10. We welcomed all guests, their wives, and their children.
11. I completely forgot where I put the package; I must be having a senior moment.
12. Studying the techniques by which an actor achieved his success can help other actors succeed.
13. Each doctor should send one of his nurses to the seminar.
14. If you use a technical word that he won't understand, explain it to him.
15. Each department head should report her progress by May 1.

Multiple-Choice Questions

Choose the best answer to each question.

1. Which of the following terms is considered sexist today?
 - (a) Senator
 - (b) Representative
 - (c) Average person
 - (d) Mankind

2. Today, all the following terms are considered biased *except*
 - (a) Fireman
 - (b) Policeman
 - (c) Humanity
 - (d) Female lawyer
3. A cliché is
 - (a) An overused expression, often a metaphor or simile
 - (b) A fresh, vivid description
 - (c) Rarely found in everyday speech and writing
 - (d) Inflated language that contains many unnecessary words
4. All the following expressions are considered clichés *except*
 - (a) As fresh as a daisy
 - (b) A torrid thunderstorm
 - (c) Right as rain
 - (d) Sick as a dog
5. All the following expressions are examples of evasive, dishonest language *except*
 - (a) Made redundant
 - (b) Fresh bread
 - (c) Laid off
 - (d) Involuntarily leisured
6. The phrase “automotive internists” for car mechanics is an example of
 - (a) A simile
 - (b) Inflated language
 - (c) A metaphor
 - (d) A cliché
7. *Euphemisms* are best defined as
 - (a) Words and phrases that don’t discriminate on the basis of gender, physical condition, age, race, gender, or any other quality
 - (b) Overused words and phrases
 - (c) Inflated language that contains many unnecessary words
 - (d) Inoffensive or positive words or phrases used to avoid a harsh reality
8. Language that is wordy and unnecessarily complex is often called
 - (a) Euphemisms
 - (b) Clichés
 - (c) Bureaucratic language
 - (d) Sexist

MORE ABOUT LANGUAGE AND GENDER

| older usage | current usage |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| spokesman | spokesperson |
| fireman, policeman | firefighter, police officer |
| air hostess | flight attendant |
| cleaning lady | cleaner |
| foreman | supervisor |
| man-made | artificial |
| mankind | the human race / human beings |
| to man (a machine or place of work) | to staff |

Task 1.

Change these sentences so they reflect modern usage.

- 1 Three firemen helped put out a fire at a disused warehouse last night.
- 2 A spokesman for the Department of Education provided us with a statement.
- 3 Cleaning lady wanted for house in Priory Street.
- 4 The helpline is continuously manned even during holiday periods.
- 5 All our air hostesses are fluent in at least three languages.
- 6 The fibres in this garment are man-made.
- 7 Policemen today spend more time in cars than on the beat.
- 8 This was a great step for mankind.
- 9 The man in the street has little time for such issues.
- 10 Salesmen are often well trained and can be very persuasive.

Words referring to men and women

| words | meaning/comment | example |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| male, female | used for gender classification in biology | male and female bees |
| masculine, feminine | having qualities traditionally felt to be typically male or female | masculine pride, feminine charm |
| guy, bloke | informal words for a man | Jack's a really nice guy . |
| guys | an informal word for men and women, especially in the phrase you guys , as a way of addressing people directly | Do any of you guys fancy going out for a pizza tonight? |
| girlfriend | used by women to refer to a female friend | I'm meeting up with a few girlfriends this evening. |
| girlie/girly | used to describe things that girls and young women often enjoy without men, especially involving clothes, make-up, etc. | They're having a girlie evening at home. |
| lad | informal word for a boy or young man | He's having a night out with some of the lads tonight. |
| laddish | used to describe unpleasant behaviour thought to be typical of young men in a group, especially drinking alcohol | I can't stand that kind of laddish behaviour! |
| macho | used to describe a man who likes to appear strong and doesn't show his feelings | He refuses to cry – it would spoil his macho image! |

Task 2

Choose the correct word to complete each sentence.

- 1 She always dresses in a very *feminine* / *female* way.
- 2 The *masculine* / *male* cat is less aggressive than his sister.
- 3 Do you *girlfriends* / *guys* fancy meeting up later?
- 4 The bar was full of loud, *lad* / *laddish* young men.
- 5 Ross likes to see himself as a tough *male* / *macho* man!
- 6 Anna's going away for the weekend with a few *girlfriends* / *females*.