

"LADIES & GENTLEMEN..." Tips for the Gender-Sensitive Speaker & Writer

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Non-sexist literary standards for newspapers and magazines have been set by stylists and have significantly improved the printed word for over a dozen years. Many of these guidelines serve us well when we are standing in front of an audience as speakers or trainers especially when our presentation is somewhat formal. Here are some tips that professional speakers and writers have found useful and which can be applied to virtual working situations such as teleconferencing and e-mail. Though the examples are primarily about English usage, similar issues exist in most European languages. Therefore, read what follows as a suggestion to be conscious of the choice of words in whatever language you need to communicate with colleagues.

- 1) "Ladies and Gentlemen,"** is a time honored ritual form of address to which very few object. However, to address an all-female professional audience simply as "Ladies" would in all but the most conservative circumstances be unacceptable. Another approach that might be more comfortable is, "Good morning, everyone," or, "Hello, team." E-mail messages can may need no greeting, but if you choose to use one, something like "Dear team mates/colleagues/etc.", is neither artificial nor sexist. "Girls" is commonly used in Europe though coming under fire. Certainly do not address a female group in the U.S. with this term, and it's probably not best for women over 13 anywhere, especially in a professional context.
- 2) Jokes and humor** require the greatest discretion, mostly because they generally rely on old stereotypes for creating rapport with the audience, particularly when speaking, but also some times when writing. Usually they are more for the speaker's comfort than for his or her audience. If you must use humor, the trick is to laugh at ourselves and avoid our laughing at each other's expense. It is sad to see so many excellent speakers and writers spoil an otherwise great presentation with an offhand remark about their wives shopping habits or their husband's football addiction. Don't take opportunities for bringing out the innuendo for a cheap laugh at the other sex or at gay people. Assessments of the general populations continue to show a gay and lesbian population of about 10%. Hence, in a group as large as 5 people there is a 50% chance that a wisecrack about gay people will rub someone the wrong way.
- 3) Citing and quoting.** Use the same format for speaking about women and men. For example if Mr. John Jones and Dr. Gerda Larson are to be quoted or addressed in your speech or mail, don't say, "As Mr. Jones pointed out..," and later follow up with, " As Lucy Larson also demonstrated..." "Mr. Jones and Dr. Larson" is appropriate, so are "Lucy

and John," if the context or culture are informal enough, as is, "Lucy Larson and John Jones."

- 4) **Compliments and acknowledgements.** Traditionally women are complimented for "looks" and men for "deeds" by men. Rarely do we hear a woman do this. Even more rarely do we hear men complimented on their appearance. Most speakers would do well to keep their thanks and acknowledgements focused on what people have done or achieved, unless the topic of the talk itself is personal appearance or couture. If the men on the other end of the teleconference look good, tell them so, and don't just focus on the women.
- 5) **Man-talk and Woman-talk.** There are words in most languages that tend to be used primarily by men or by women. Their use is rarely a problem unless we overdo it to the point of excluding or boring part of the audience. A steady dose of "he-man" sports and military slang can be a bit much for even women with "absolutely gorgeous" patience, and those who use too many flowery and effusive adjectives won't "score" well with business colleagues of either sex.
- 6) **Inclusive pronouns.** No one wants to say "he or she" or "him and her" every time there is need for a generic singular pronoun, though it seems less cumbersome when speaking than when writing. If one does not have to make many such references, it is tolerable, e.g., "Every doctor that I know complains about the high office rent that he or she is required to pay quarterly."

Where frequent generics are needed, some people prefer to alternate between the masculine and feminine pronouns; still others choose to use "they" and "them" in a generic sense, e.g., "Every doctor I know complains about the high office rent that they are required to pay." This last solution is becoming more common, and is probably the simplest even though staunch grammarians, particularly in the UK still shift uncomfortably in their seats when they hear it. Of course, it is often possible to avoid the whole problem by using plurals, e.g., "Doctors I know..."
- 7) **Avoid superfluous indications of gender.** These tend to diminish the subject. "He found a good female/woman lawyer to talk to the vendor," can be stated, "He found a good lawyer to talk to the vendor." It might be necessary to stress gender in some cases, e.g., "As a female lawyer she found herself avoided by certain clients who thought she would not be tough enough."
- 8) **In English, "Male" and "female" are adjectives, "women" and "men" are nouns.** Avoid statements like, "We have lots of males applying for this job." Say either, "We have lots of male applicants for this job," or "We have lots of men applying for this job." Only biologists and zoologists are exempt from this rule.

Besides being careful to avoid giving offense, a sensitive communicator can be proactive in her or his approach to the issue of gender. (The switch in the usual order of pronouns in the previous sentence is one example of this). Even more significantly one can habitually use representative examples and stories about both sexes and deliberately on occasion pose people in non-stereotypical roles. This needs to be done again and again, as the bias in favor of men and against women in workplace situations is often very deep. We recently heard the story of a little boy who didn't want to be a pilot because he thought it was "a girl's job." (His mother was an airline pilot!)

Much attention to sexist language has in recent years been rightly directed at avoiding put-downs and eliminating linguistic prejudice against women. We should also be careful, especially when discussing women's issues not to portray men as the source of every evil. We all share in a social and linguistic heritage that has lessened both sexes' ability to live a fuller life.

Bonus exercise

Men and the Words of Work

To date, men have created much of the vocabulary of work. As the nature of work and people doing it changes, so will the words used to describe it. Below is a list of terms and phrases commonly used in the workplace, for the most part derived from male experiences with sports and war. Try to broaden this vocabulary, drawing from women's experiences or from those which men and women have in common. Brainstorm alternatives for each word and enter them on the right. This is a particularly good exercise to do with a co-worker of the other sex.

top brass	
strategic planning	
full court press	
when in doubt punt	
task force	
hit squad	
the whole nine yards	
rank and file	
point man	

teamwork	
go to the wall	
bite the bullet	
campaign	
the competition	
in the field	
make your mark	
comrades in arms	

What different experiences, do women bring into the workplace? What words describe these experiences? What could they describe in the workaday world?