

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Gender-neutral communication: how to do it

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The English language has a tendency to reinforce patriarchy, but there are ways to stop that. Shutterstock

The English language is loaded in many subtle ways to reflect the dominance of male hierarchies throughout history. Who says so? Well, linguists such as **Robyn Lakoff** and **Deborah Tannen**, and feminist writers such as **Dale Spender** for starters.

As the sexes become more equal, it becomes useful to learn how this occurs, and how to avoid perpetuating this imbalance. It gets a bit monotonous writing he/she and ridiculous saying “he slash she”. But there are much better and more creative solutions to gender-neutral expression, which, in its own small way, helps create a more level playing field for the battle of the sexes.

Let’s be clear: we’re not talking about grammatical gender, where everything takes male, female or neuter inflections, irrespective of whether the thing named is “masculine”, “feminine” or “neuter” in character.

English has ditched **grammatical gender** of words, along with most of **grammatical case** (relating to certain nouns and pronouns, and their order in a sentence: if you know “her gave the book to she” is wrong, then you already know about case) and **grammatical mood** (the role a verb takes in sentence: compare imperative mood (“type that letter now!”) with

subjunctive mood (“if I were you, I would type it up before she arrives”).

These things make it simultaneously easier and harder to learn than other, more “inflected” languages, or languages whose word beginnings and endings change according to grammatical gender, case and mood. Simpler, because there are fewer categories to remember (Russian has six cases, German has six moods); harder, because there are fewer rules to follow and sometimes exceptions outnumber rules.

So in what ways does English err in “loading” meanings more towards the masculine end of the continuum? Consider generic nouns or titles, such as chairman, man-made, manpower, foreman, salesman and so on. Historically, these roles or associations related to men; social changes are not necessarily reflected in title changes.

Here are some other ways the English language reinforces patriarchy:

### Spotlighting

Spotlighting occurs when the use of an adjective draws attention to a role adoption that challenges a gender role. For example “male nurse”, “male prostitute” or “career woman”.

### Diminutivisation

Diminutivisation is where roles and names are formed by adding lower-status and/or affectionate suffixes to titles and names. For example, “actress” or “waitress”.

### Differential naming

Differential naming is a common practice where males are referred to by adults’ titles, while females may be referred to by pre-adult titles. For example:

*Mr Smith, the men from accounts and the girls from marketing want to see you.*

### Featurism

Featurism is where something such as appearance is focused on in women but not in men. This trivialises and demeans the contribution of women.

*Outgoing prime minister Kevin Rudd gave his farewell speech as leader of the Australian Labor Party, telling his colleagues there were no hard feelings, even for his enemies.*

*In her farewell speech, the Prime Minister (Gillard) wore a little black dress paired with a structure collarless blazer that featured sleeves in olive green – a colour that stylists will tell you is good for her autumn colouring. Her glasses were simple but stylish in graduated tones so as not to appear too harsh. Her hair was cut in a style that suited her face and colouring. She wore statement stud earrings that flashed stylishly from under her bob.*

## Some strategies to create inclusiveness

How then can we express ourselves in a more gender-neutral way? Traditional sex and gender roles have undergone dramatic transformation in recent times. This has meant that we need to think more carefully when we use gender-specific language, ensuring we have a language for all people, not just men. Some strategies for using more inclusive language are as follows:

Recast the sentence to omit the gender-specific pronoun/s:

*The average student may end up spending too much of his money on software.*

Becomes:

*The average student may end up spending too much money on software.*

Use imperative mood of verbs - in other words, give an order:

*He or she can load the DVD.*

Becomes:

*Load the DVD.*

Replace third-person pronouns with second-person pronouns:

*He or she must clean up the conference room at the end of each meeting.*

Becomes:

*You must clean up the conference room at the end of each meeting.*

Use plurals:

*The modern plumber knows that he cannot neglect the paperwork if his business is to*

*thrive.*

Becomes:

*Modern plumbers know that they cannot neglect the paperwork if their businesses are to thrive.*

Repeat the noun:

*The builder will find all the traditional lines of nails and screws, now in metric or SI. In fact, in converting from imperial measures, we have taken the opportunity to expand the product range, giving him or her more, not fewer, resources.*

Becomes:

*The builder will find all the traditional lines of nails and screws, now in metric or SI. In fact, in converting from imperial measures, we have taken the opportunity to expand the product range, giving the builder more, not fewer, resources.*

Replace third-person pronouns with indefinite article (a, an) or definite article (the):

*The manager or his assistant ...*

Becomes:

*The manager or an assistant ...*

Change second-person pronouns to generic pronoun (although this can appear somewhat pompous so use sparingly):

*She will need to consider her position on this.*

Becomes:

*One would need to consider one's position on this.*

Change a nominal to a verbal expression:

*A person who has in his possession such prohibited substances will in fact have broken the law.*

Becomes:

*A person who possesses such prohibited substances will in fact have broken the law.*

Recast restricting/spotlighting names, titles and roles:

chairman: chair, chairperson

man-made: artificial, synthetic, constructed

manpower: human resources, workforce

foreman: supervisor, team leader

salesman: sales person, representative, consultant

manhole: access hatch

shopgirl: staff member, salesperson

actress: actor

And now you're a gender-neutral communication expert (I was going to say master but that's loaded too, due to the sexual loading of the term mistress...).