

ACEP
Association canadienne
des employés professionnels



CAPE
Canadian Association
of Professional Employees

Inclusive Writing Guide

Background

CAPE includes members of all ages, ethnicities, genders, religions and sexual orientations. They expect to be represented in all aspects of their union. In 2022, CAPE reaffirmed its commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion by establishing an [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-committee](#), in addition to other actions. The Communications Section was tasked with developing a guide for using inclusive gender-neutral communications going forward.

Gender-neutral writing avoids references to gender. It is increasingly becoming standard practice in communications. It is essential to apply gender-neutral guidelines to ensure inclusion of the following audiences:

- individuals whose gender is unknown
- non-binary individuals
- a diverse group of people (so that no member of the group feels excluded)

This Guide is based on best practices and techniques to transition to using fully respectful, non-discriminatory and inclusive language. As there is currently no consensus on the process of inclusive writing, this guide will be updated over time. A similar guide has been published [for inclusive writing in French](#). All CAPE staff and members are encouraged to read the guides in both languages.

For any questions or concerns, [please contact CAPE](#).



“To be as inclusive as possible, the Translation Bureau recommends eliminating references to gender in correspondence whenever possible...”

Introduction

Unlike other languages, English does not use grammatical gender and most of its nouns, adjectives and pronouns are therefore not gender-specific. The very few gender markers are:

- pronouns and possessives (he, she, her and his)
- some nouns and forms of address

Most English nouns do not have grammatical gender forms (president, steward), whereas a few nouns are specifically masculine or feminine (actor/actress, waiter/waitress). Some nouns that once ended in “man” now have neutral equivalents that remove references to gender (spokesperson for spokesman, chair/chairperson for chairman).

Another challenge for gender-inclusive communications in English is the use of the masculine form by default. For example, “Every delegate must submit his credentials to the organizing committee.”

Once we are aware of these non-inclusive terms in our communications, we can use the techniques described below to ensure gender neutrality and inclusion.

Definitions

Gender-neutral language is a generic term covering the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language and gender-fair language. The purpose of gender-neutral language is to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or gender is the norm or implying that there are only two genders. Using gender-fair and inclusive language also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change and contributes to achieving gender equality.

- **Gender-neutral:** not referring to either gender but only to people in general
- **Inclusive:** allowing and accommodating people who have historically been excluded because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability

For a complete list of gender-related terms, please refer to the Translation Bureau's [Gender and sexual diversity glossary](#).

For the purposes of this guide, the following two definitions are important:

- **Binary:** identifying or expressing a gender identity of male or female
- **Non-binary:** identifying or expressing a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female

Techniques

Basic techniques

Use alternative nouns

Although some words, often nouns, are associated with a gender, gender-neutral alternatives can often be found.

People and occupations

Avoid	Instead use
waiter, waitress	server
steward, stewardess	flight attendant
hey, guys!	hey, everyone!

Words with “man”

Avoid	Instead use
man, woman	person or individual
chairman	chair or chairperson
manpower	staff, workforce
spokesman	spokesperson
businessman, businesswoman	businessperson, businesspeople
man-hours	person-hours
layman	lay person, lay people
Frenchman	French person, French people, francophones
salesman, saleswoman	sales representative, salesperson
policeman, policewoman	police officer
mankind	people, human beings, humanity

Many other words contain the sub-root “man”, such as fireman, mailman, postman, barman, weatherman. Alternatives can be found along the same lines.

Note: There are some exceptions. Words such as manufacture, manipulate, manual and manuscript come from man(u), the Latin root for “hand”.

Family members

These terms have to be used with utmost care, mostly in the context of benefits and collective agreements (CAs), or to avoid assuming a person’s gender.

Avoid	Instead use
father, mother	parent
father-in-law, mother-in-law	parent-in-law
stepfather, stepmother	stepparent
brother, sister	sibling
brother-in-law, sister-in-law	sibling-in-law
stepbrother, stepsister	stepsibling
son, daughter	child
son-in-law, daughter-in-law	child-in-law
husband, wife	spouse (CAs), partner, significant other
aunt, uncle	parent’s sibling (or the less common “pibling”)
niece, nephew	sibling’s kid (or the less common “nibling”)
grandson, granddaughter	grandchild

Repeat the noun/subject

1. When there are two different nouns in the same sentence, repeat the noun to avoid confusion.
 - The Employer may authorize the employee to work ~~his/her~~ **the employee’s** normal work day...
 - In this case, we could not have used “their” in replacement of “his/her”
2. Repeat the person’s name instead of assuming their gender.
 - Charlie N. is a recent addition to our management team. ~~He~~ **Charlie** brings 15 years of experience...

Omit courtesy titles

Omit courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Ms.) when writing a letter or an email to a specific person. Instead, write:

- “Dear” + given name(s) + last name.

It is also a good practice to refer to the position of the person(s) being written to, such as:

- Dear colleague(s), ...
- Dear member(s), ...
- Dear applicant(s), ...

Avoid titles in the body of your text (except for the gender-inclusive honorifics “Dr.” and “Prof.”).

Use the singular “they”, “their”, “them”

The singular “they”, “their” and “them” are the preferred alternative to the generic use of gendered pronouns “he/she”, “his/hers”, “him/her”. (The use of “they” as a singular pronoun dates back to at least 1526, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.)

- Every member has paid ~~his/her~~ **their** dues.
- An employee who feels ~~he/she~~ **they** have been subjected to harassment should file a complaint.

Note: Gendered pronouns that refer to an entity, rather than a natural person, should be replaced with the pronoun “it”.

- The bargaining agent called all ~~his~~ **its** members. ~~He~~ **It** acted quickly.

But if the sentence includes more than one subject, then the name of the entity should be repeated to avoid confusion, as explained above.

Complementary techniques

Use the plural form (with caution)

- ~~The Applicant~~ **Applicants** must send ~~his~~ **their** applications by December 31.
- ~~Every delegate~~ **All delegates** must register if ~~he or she~~ **they** wish to attend the ceremony.



IMPORTANT NOTE: make sure the plural form does NOT change the application, scope or value of the text.

In the example below, the use of a plural subject creates a subtle change in the meaning of the provision. Sentence *a*) emphasizes that each employee, individually, is expected to organize hours of work, workdays and days of rest, while sentence *b*) may suggest that employees are expected to organize their hours of work together or collectively rather than individually.

- a) **Each** employee **is** expected to organize **his** hours of work, workdays and days of rest in order to ...*
- b) **Employees are** expected to organize **their** hours of work, workdays and days of rest in order to...*

In this situation the preferred solution would be to use the singular “their” in the sentence:

Each employee is expected to organize their hours of work, workdays and days of rest in order to

Use other gender-neutral pronouns

1. Use the pronouns “you”, “your”
 - ~~The applicant must send his or her application~~ Send **your** application...
2. Use the relative pronoun “who”
 - ~~If a A complainant he~~ is not satisfied with the board’s decision, **he** can ask for a rehearing.
3. Use the pronoun “one”
 - A staff member in Halifax earns less than ~~he~~ **one** would in Toronto.

Omit the pronoun

In some case, it is easier to drop the pronoun or gendered formulation:

- A local officer must be trained as a delegate before ~~he may attend~~ **attending** the AGM.
- Each applicant must send ~~his or her~~ **an** application...

Switch from active to passive voice

Using the passive voice should be done sparingly and when no better alternative can be found.

- The grievor must have reliable evidence of the situation ~~he/she is describing~~ **being described**.
- Any member who identifies a resolution ~~he or she would like to amend~~ **to be amended** should raise his or her **their** hand.

Other considerations

1. Updating existing texts (policies, job descriptions, etc.): When making amendments or updates to existing documents to ensure gender neutrality, the utmost care should be taken not to change the meaning, application, scope or value of the text.
Any language indicating that “the masculine gender includes the feminine gender” should be removed. If a replacement text is required to assert the gender neutrality of a text, please refer to the CAPE Communications Section.
2. Forms: Make sure that people who are non-binary can see their gender acknowledged and can fill out the form accurately. This can be done by simply adding a “non-binary” option alongside the options of male/female. Avoid using an “Other” category.
3. “Maternity Benefits” in collective agreements (subject to the upcoming decision by the Treasury Board): With the exception of “maternity benefits”, which refers to a specific legal entitlement under the Employment Insurance (EI) program and Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP), it was decided to replace the term “maternity” in the Treasury Board agreements with “pregnancy/maternity”. Further details will be provided when available.
4. Gender-neutral language in French: A similar guide has been developed for using [gender-neutral language in French](#). Since the French language has a binary nature, it presents a bigger challenge to write, convert or translate in an inclusive way. Bilingual people, staff and members are encouraged to read the guides for both languages.

References

CAPE

- [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-committee](#)
- [Diversity with Equity and Inclusion](#)
- [Guide de la rédaction inclusive à l'ACEP](#)

Translation Bureau / Government of Canada

- [Gender-Inclusive Writing: Correspondence \(Linguistic recommendation from the Translation Bureau\)](#)
- [Making letters and emails gender-inclusive](#)
- [Gender-neutral writing \(Part 1\): The pronoun problem](#)
- [Gender-neutral writing \(Part 2\): Questions of usage](#)
- [Language Navigator – Inclusive Language](#)
- [The singular 'they' is gaining acceptance](#)
- [Embracing the singular 'they' as a gender-neutral pronoun](#)

Federal Government

- [Protecting against Discrimination, Hate Propaganda, and Hate Crime on the grounds of Gender Identity and Gender Expression](#)
- [BILL C-16 \(2017\) – An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code](#)

Province of Ontario

[Guidelines for Accommodating Gender Identity and Gender Expression](#)

Wikipedia

[Gender-neutral language](#)

