



## **Inclusive Language Guideline**

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On 04 May 2021, the Executive Board decided that the following Guidelines for Inclusive Language should be used in official documents and internal and external communication of Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences.

The use of gender-sensitive language is a fundamental building block for successful gender equality. Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences is committed to the principle of a gender-sensitive university. This is reflected, for example, in the use of appropriate language in science, research, learning and teaching without limiting the freedom of research and teaching. The German version of this document was originally published in March of 2020. Though the English and German versions differ due to the specifics of each language, both versions aim to instruct readers on inclusive, gender-sensitive writing and lay the groundwork for practical, everyday use. The first part of this guideline contains examples and explanations for practice. The second part illustrates the added value of using gender-sensitive language.

If there are any questions regarding the information in this guideline and the implementation thereof, please contact us:

Central Equal Opportunity Office and Family Service

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## Strategies for formulating texts inclusively and non-discriminatory

At Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences, inclusive language should be used to address all people on the gender spectrum in an equal manner. Inclusive language is first and foremost achieved by gender-neutral wording. Though fewer words and phrases in English are gendered as compared to German, it is important to be aware of these instances for when they occur. This guideline can help.

### Gender-biased terms

Many commonly used words and occupations can be replaced with gender-neutral terms.

Example:

#### Less Inclusive

mankind  
man-made  
freshman  
mothering

#### More Inclusive

humankind  
handmade, handcrafted, artificial  
first-year student  
nurturing

### Gender-biased proverbs

To avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes, do not use biased expressions or clichés like “women’s work”, “runs like a girl” or “men just don’t understand”. If you are unsure whether something could be considered discriminatory language, try swapping the genders and assessing again.

Example:

- “Men cannot do two things at once.” → ”Women cannot do two things at once.”
- “Women’s place is in the home.” → “Men’s place is in the home.”
- “Behind every great man there’s a great woman.” → “Behind every great woman there’s a great man.”
- “The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” → “The way to a women’s heart is through her stomach.”

### Gendered professions

Some professions have an inherent gender stereotype (nurse, doctor, secretary, teacher, for example), which is not always true. In these cases, the use of the pronoun “they” is preferable for its gender-neutral quality. Alternatively, you may make the conscious decision to reverse the cultural stereotype in order to make gender biases more visible: for example, referring to an unspecified nurse as “he” or an unspecified doctor as “she”.

In other cases where a profession is gendered linguistically, a gender-neutral version usually exists. Examples:

Less Inclusive

policeman  
seamstress  
chairman, chairwoman  
fireman  
housewife

More Inclusive

police officer  
tailor, sewer, mender  
chair person, chair  
firefighter  
homemaker

## Creating inclusivity through sentence structure

### Passive voice

This is a good strategy for avoiding gendered constructions altogether. Note, however, that the passive voice can change the emphasis of a sentence and sound unclear or obfuscating, particularly when readers expect clear agents for actions.

Example:

Less Inclusive

„If an author describes a study, **he** should provide reliable evidence.”

More Inclusive

“If an author describes a study, **reliable evidence should be provided.**”

### Use of plural

Rewriting sentences using a plural construction can help to avoid gendered language.

Example:

Less Inclusive

“A student who loses too much sleep may have trouble focusing on **his/her** exams.”

More Inclusive

“**Students** who lose too much sleep may have trouble focusing on **their** exams.”

## Pronouns and Possessives (he/she, her/his)

### Omitting the gendered word

Where possible, omit gendered expressions altogether. This has the added bonus of simplifying your writing, which usually improves its quality as well.

Example:

#### Less Inclusive

“An applicant must write a compelling motivation letter before **he/she** will receive a scholarship.”

#### More Inclusive

“Applicants must write a compelling motivation letter before receiving a scholarship.”

### More than one pronoun

Avoid using only a single pronoun like “he” or “him” in your writing. Make gender more visible by using “he or she” instead. You can use shorter alternatives such as “he/she” or “s/he”. While more integrative, note that the latter two versions are considered more informal in written texts.

Example:

“If a student has a question s/he can contact the Student Advisory Service.”

### Plural pronouns

The third-person plural pronouns “they/them” can and frequently are used to refer to a single individual in a gender-neutral way. However, this approach is generally more common in speech rather than in (formal) writing.

Example:

#### Less Inclusive

“That person still owes me a coffee, but I don’t know how to remind **her** of it.”

#### More Inclusive

“That person still owes me a coffee, but I don’t know how to remind **them** of it.”

### Pronoun “one”

“One” can also be used as a gender-neutral pronoun, referring essentially to “any person”. Note, however, that it can also change the meaning of the sentence to a generality.

Example:

#### Less Inclusive

“Too much studying makes **her** drowsy.”  
(refers to a specific person)

#### More Inclusive

“Too much studying makes **one** drowsy.”  
(generally the case for all students)

## Relative pronoun “who”/omitting pronouns

Example:

### Less Inclusive

“If a staff member has problems with the WIFI, **he** can come to me.”

### More Inclusive

“A staff member **who** has problems with the WIFI can come to me.”

“Anyone with a WiFi problem can come to me.”

## Forms of address

The gender identity of an individual cannot be assumed from their name alone, nor should it. Especially in an international context, the gender connotation of a name may be unfamiliar to the writer. Therefore, it is essential to address emails and other writing in a gender-neutral way. The simplest option would be to omit the gendered “Mr.” or “Ms.” and use the full name instead.

Example:

“Dear Maggie Smith, ...”, “Dear Tom Selleck, ...”

Alternatively, a salutation without a name, albeit slightly more informal, also constitutes a gender-neutral solution:

“Good morning/evening/afternoon...”

In the footnote of an email, one can ask for the gender identity and the ways of addressing.

Example:

“P.S.: Gender identity cannot be deduced accurately from people's appearance or names. We, therefore, attempt to use gender-neutral language, including for terms of address. You are welcome to tell us how we should address you.”

Similarly, people may tell you through their signature or footnote how they prefer to be addressed.

If the gender identity of a person is known, only use “Mr”, “Ms” or, if preferred, “Mx”<sup>1</sup> (pronounced *mɪks/MIKS*). Alternatively, if applicable, you can use the academic title. “Mrs” and “Miss” are outdated and should be avoided, as they place emphasis on a woman's marital status, which is inappropriate for professional contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Mx is mainly used in Great Britain but gaining importance in the US as well, for example. Contrary to British English, the American English version uses full stops for truncations: Mr., Ms., Dr.

Whenever addressing more than one person (e.g. a married couple), refer to all of them in the same manner, if applicable.

Example:

Instead of “Dr John Smith and Mrs Miller” use “Dr John Smith and Dr Elizabeth Miller.” or “Dr John Smith and Elizabeth Miller” respectively, depending on the academic status.

## **Checklist for gender-related revisions of writing**

To assess whether your writing contains biased expressions, a few simple questions can help.

- Did I use any gender-specific language? Can I omit this language without losing the intended meaning or sacrificing clarity?
- Did I use the words “man” or “men” while referring to groups which might not exclusively include men?
- Did I use the words “he”, “him”, “his” or “himself” while referring to people who may not be men?
- Did I refer to/address all people in equal tone and manner?

## The benefit of using gender-sensitive language<sup>2</sup>

Language influences our perception and way of thinking. Gender-sensitive language thus makes a significant contribution to integrating the diversity of genders into our consciousness and everyday life. It is a fundamental building block for gender equality.

The English language itself provides different terms and meanings within the scope of gender. There is a clear distinction between sex, civil status, and gender and for example. “Sex” refers to the category assigned at birth, “civil status” to a person’s category as defined by law, and “gender” to the lived and embodied identity of an individual.

In 2013, revisions to German civil status law (Personenstandsgesetz) allowed persons to opt out of indicating sex at all when asked, and, in 2018, a third option was introduced in addition to “male” and “female”: divers, or “diverse” in the sense of “other”, or “not applicable” (§22 PStG). Both options are now available to people who could not be assigned to either the female or the male sex at birth (intersex persons). As a result of the new category “diverse”, the term “third gender” has become common parlance in German. But this is inaccurate. “Diverse” is not an all-encompassing third gender identity, but rather a civil status that can be used for intersex people. These individuals can still identify as male or female regardless of their civil status.

Consequently, people who identify neither as female nor male can belong to a variety of other identities, such as agender or genderfluid, which are often grouped under the umbrella term “non-binary” (in contrast to the female/male binary). These identities can go hand in hand with intersex, but also with “clearly male” or “clearly female” physical appearances (often referred to as “passing” as male/female). Hence, non-binary individuals can and will hold a male or female civil status. In order to legally map non-binary identities, some scholars argue for the accessibility of the civil status “diverse” for physically male/female classified persons as well<sup>3</sup>, while others argue for the complete removal of gender references in birth certificates and passports<sup>4</sup>.

The basis for the use of gender-sensitive language among members of Rhine-Waal University is the Equal Opportunities Act of North Rhine-Westphalia (Landesgleichstellungsgesetz NRW): *“Laws and other legal provisions should take linguistic equality between women and men into account. In official correspondence, equal linguistic treatment of women and men must be ensured. Gender-neutral forms should be used in documents.”* (§ 4 LGG NRW, translated by

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<sup>2</sup> In order to write these notes other language guidelines of German universities as well as the guidelines of the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia on equality between men and women in legal language were utilized.

<sup>3</sup> Suliak (2018)

<sup>4</sup> Adamczak (2018)

the author).

Therefore, the use of gender-sensitive language is not only an integral part of Rhine-Waal's embracing diversity, it is also necessary for legal reasons, particularly when dealing with personal pronouns. Authors should thus pay close attention to gender-sensitive wording, especially in the early stages of writing. Correcting language at the editing stage of the writing process is more likely to lead to unsatisfactory communication and style outcomes, not to mention produce avoidable errors.

## **Acknowledgement**

Rebecca Knecht and Stefanie Aunkofer created the German version of this guideline; Julia Miersch is responsible for the English translation and adaptation. Members of the Equal Opportunities and Diversity Commission, as well as central and decentral equal opportunity officers of Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences, supported in the process. We want to thank all involved parties for their cooperation.

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