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Tips on Writing

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Avoid “sexist” writing without making an issue of it

We have all seen it: the writer uses the word “they” to avoid writing “he” or “she.” For example, “The bank executive looked over the papers, and then they said, ‘We’ll need more collateral.’” To folks with an ear for the language, that is like the sound of fingernails scratching on a blackboard. (For those who don’t remember blackboards, or fingernails scratching on them, let me explain that it is an *irritating* sound, one that gives some people convulsive shivers.)

Why is that construction so irritating? Because “they” is plural. It is an error to use a plural pronoun to refer to a singular noun. But we long ago decided that it is not appropriate to use “he” to refer to people in general, that to do so is “sexist.” Word buffs can argue the etymology (word history), but the matter has been decided. It is not proper to use masculine pronouns to refer to all people, male and female alike.

That leaves some awkward choices. One is “he or she.” Another is the unattractive “s/he.” And the one so often used is “they,” used as if the word were singular, not plural. But there are other solutions.

The best choice is to reword in to avoid the dilemma entirely, and to do so in a way that does not draw attention to your efforts to avoid sexist wording. Here are some examples.

Problem sentence

- 1 The bank executive looked over the papers, and then they said, “We’ll need more collateral.”
- 2 A business person needs to keep his or her eye on the customer’s needs at all times.
- 3 When the customer walks into the store, they should be greeted promptly and with a smile.

An unobtrusive fix

- The bank executive looked over the papers, and then said, “We’ll need more collateral.”
- A business person needs to keep an eye on the customer’s needs at all times.
- Customers should be greeted promptly and with a smile when they walk into the store.

In item 1, the correction is simple: omit the word “they.” It is not needed. In item 2, the solution is to change “his or her eye” to “an eye” — no pronoun. Notice, by the way, that item 2 already avoids “businessman,” a word that is no longer considered proper unless used specifically to refer to a particular male who is in business. (“John Smith, a businessman in Modesto, California . . .”) In item 3, the solution is to substitute the plural “customers” for the singular “customer.” Then the plural pronoun “they” works just fine.

Copyright — easier than you may think

Did you know that you don't have to register something you have written in order for it to be copyrighted? It is true — you don't have to. But there is a catch.

The first thing to know is that under current U.S. copyright law, as soon as a work takes tangible form it is protected by copyright. What is tangible form? Writing on a piece of paper, or a word processing file saved to disk, or any other sort of thing that you can show as a physical object. That means that ideas are not copyrighted, nor are the sentences and paragraphs you speak — until they are put down on paper or in a computer file or other tangible form.

There is a catch. The catch is that in order to sue for violation of copyright, you must first have registered the article or book or other creation with the Copyright Office. That requires filing a form, with two copies of the material to be copyrighted, and paying a fee. Registering gives you some rights you would not otherwise have, especially if done soon enough and before a violation has taken place.

Strictly speaking, under current law no copyright notice is needed in order to secure copyright. With or without a notice, your work in tangible form is under copyright. But lack of a copyright notice might be used as a defense, allowing a claim of innocent infringement. For that reason, if you are publishing, say, a company newsletter, a copyright notice might be a good idea. Registration might or might not make sense, depending on the kind of material and its commercial value. I am not a lawyer, and will let this go at that. For more information, see the U.S. Copyright Office's home page, www.copyright.gov.

Three of the best reference books for writers

Professional writers might have shelves full of reference books. But most folks who write because it is a necessary task rather than a full-time occupation can get by with just a few books to reach for from time to time. Here are three I recommend for everyone who writes occasional newsletters, articles, correspondence, or proposals.

- A good college dictionary. One of my favorites is *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, published by Houghton Mifflin. Another long-time favorite is *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, published by Webster's New World. My father, William Umbach, was etymological editor of the first three editions of the World dictionary. I often observed as he pored over reference books in search of the history of a word (its etymology) all the way back to its Indo-European roots.
- A good thesaurus. The old reliable is *Roget's International Thesaurus*, currently in its fifth edition, published by Harper Collins. Some folks find the organization of Roget's difficult, as it requires looking first in the index, and then in a numbered section in the body of the book. But with five minutes of practice, that becomes second-nature. There are other thesauruses, with different styles of organization. But whichever type you pick, let me recommend a full-size hardbound edition.
- Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, published by Oxford University Press. This is an entertaining and usable guide to correct and effective English, with countless explanations of words and phrases and their proper use.

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