



## BIASED LANGUAGE

### What is biased language?

Most technical writers do not intend to cause their audience psychological distress; however, we sometimes lapse into word choices that can offend people—because of reasons related to gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, disability, or ethnicity.

In technical and scientific writing, aim to not mention differences among people, so instead of referring to a person as a chairman (which one could call sexist), we should consider instead using chair or chairperson. Technical writing is void of value judgements (see exercise on tone).

### Gender & Ethnicity

Also, knowing another person's ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability—markers of difference—hardly ever yields relevant information. Ergo, in writing, we should avoid referring to people as, for example, a “visually-impaired chemist” or as “a female engineer”; it implies that the person's disability or gender is the most important aspect about her or him.

Furthermore, instead of writing a sentence like “mankind has often discovered innovations to mine for resources,” consider writing something like the following: “Humankind has often discovered innovations to mine for resources.”

One could argue that mankind only privileges men whereas humankind is much more inclusive.

### Pronouns

Pronouns can often signify an unintentional bias. Pronouns and nouns must agree.

Here is an example: “Each member of the team brought their unique knowledge of nuclear fusion to the project.”

Their is a pronoun, and it refers to the noun member; their signifies many, but member indicates only one person—the pronoun does not match with the noun.



## Pronouns continued

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According to traditional grammar, we could change the their to a simple his; nonetheless, his excludes women, so we ought to use his or her: “Each member of the team brought his or her unique knowledge of nuclear fusion to the project.”

However, his or her can often be cumbersome. When possible—and to avoid any accusations of unintentional bias—use plural nouns and pronouns: “Members of the team brought their unique knowledge of nuclear fusion to the project.”

Notice the shift from the singular member to the plural members, which agrees with the plural their.