

GENDER-NEUTRAL INSTRUCTIONS

Phrasing your writing to reach all of your readers.

by Jerry Stratton

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<http://www.hoboes.com/NetLife/Gender/>

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HOW CAN I WRITE TO ALL OF MY READERS?

These notes were prompted by a discussion on the newsgroup *rec.games.frp.misc*. They are geared towards writing game rules, so most of the examples involve game rules. However, these techniques apply to writing instructions and tutorials in general.

TALK TO THE READER

Personally, I feel that if you talk to the reader as an individual, they take in more of your instructions. And when you're talking directly to your reader, you don't have to worry about their gender.

I also find that speaking directly to the reader results in more direct text and clearer instructions.

“If the player decides to take the risk of death to grab the treasure, he should make a saving throw vs. death. If successful, he has grabbed the treasure. If unsuccessful, he has died of a brain hemorrhage.”

“If you decide to take the risk of death and grab the treasure, make a saving throw vs. death. If successful, you have grabbed the treasure. Otherwise, you are dead of a brain hemorrhage.”

Of course, sometimes you are not talking to the reader in your description. You're telling the reader what to do if *someone else* does something. In that case, you'll want to try something else.

USE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

If you are describing what happens to people in general, you need to use non-gendered text. If you are talking about what would happen to Frank the Barbarian or Melinda the Ranger, you can use Frank or Melinda's gender. Frank and Melinda also have players: Tony Corman and Sandy Giles.

I find that specific examples not only make the rules easier for my readers to understand, they also make it less likely that I'm going to make a mistake. Going from generalizations to specifics brings an immediacy to both the writing and the reading. I recommend placing some example characters in your text and using these characters as your examples throughout the text. Your readers can refer to these specific examples and see how your rules work “in real life”.

“Frank the Barbarian’s 16 endurance means that Tony has to roll 16 or more to survive the spiked pit. If Tony rolls 16 or more, Frank takes 2d8 hit points of damage. If Tony rolls 15 or less, Frank dies.”

Always make sure you know whether you’re talking about the character or about the player!

TALK ABOUT EVERYONE

If you can’t talk to the reader and you can’t use a specific example, consider that you’re probably talking about a group of people.

“If a player should discover this trap door, he should make a Learning roll to understand the runes. If he makes his roll, he understands that it insults American tourists.”

“Any player who discovers this trap door should make a Learning roll to understand the runes. Success means the player understands that it insults American tourists.”

“Players who discover this trap door should each make Learning rolls to understand the runes. If successful, they understand that it insults American tourists.”

It becomes useful to go from “talking about everyone” to “using a specific example”.

TIGHTEN YOUR PROSE

Lots of pronouns referring back to an original noun can be an indication of too many sentences. Instead of saying “Take, for example, a character with a 15 intelligence. He can learn 42 languages. He can dance a jig at +5,” try saying “For example, a character with a 15 intelligence can learn 42 languages and dance a jig at +5”.

USE THE NON-PLURAL "THEY"

Under some circumstances, “they” can refer back to non-plural subjects:

“If the character writing the incantation fumbles their roll, their error will call the spirit of dead Cthulhu to life.”

“If a non-player character is killed by the vampire, they will return to life

Note that some English teachers will tell you this is poor English. They’re wrong. This gets into one of my pet peeves, which is trying to categorize the rules of a language, discovering that your rules are wrong, and then claiming that the people speaking the language are *really* the ones at fault.

In my experience, “they” can be used to refer back to non-specific nouns, especially nouns that, while singular, refer to a class of people. I would never use “they” to refer

back to a specific individual. That may be because we know that specific individual's gender, or, if we don't, that in itself is important.

WHY WRITE TO ALL READERS?

It almost seems like a silly question: why do you want to speak to your readers? Obviously, you want to write your instructions so that your readers know that those instructions apply to them.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE MATTER

You can, of course, write with whatever words you wish to use. If you wish to be understood, however, you will use words that other people understand as you meant them to be understood. If you use the word “he” to mean men and women, you are miscommunicating. And if you are producing a product for sale or other profit, you are losing customers and users.

The only ‘male’ word that even remotely approaches gender-neutrality is the use of ‘man’ in the sense of ‘the human race’. And even there, you’re going to be treading on irony if you use it too unquestioningly. “Man is a social animal, thought Sarah. He needs regular care and feeding.”

For more detailed information about the non-gender-neutrality of ‘he’ and such, see:

Brown, Roger, and Gilman, Albert. The pronouns of power and solidarity. In Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960.

Burr, Elizabeth; Dunn, Susan; and Farquhar, Norma. Women and the language of inequality. *Social Education*, 1972, 36, 841-845.

Hyde, Janet Shibley. Children’s understanding of sexist language. *Developmental Psychology*, 1984.

Martyna, Wendy. Comprehension of the generic masculine: Inferring “she” from “he.” Paper presented at the 85th annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August 1977.

For more information about gender issues in general, I recommend Sandra Bem’s “The Lenses of Gender”. Also interesting is Tavis and Wade’s “The Longest War”.

RULES OF ENGLISH VS. USAGE OF ENGLISH

While it is true that some rules of English state that “he” is gender-neutral, in practice this is not the case.

“If the customer needs to use the men’s bathroom, he should request the key from Alan. If the customer needs to use the woman’s bathroom, he should request a key from Sandra.”

I have never seen anything like that written as instructions. When we say “he was a doctor” or “he was a race car driver”, our listeners and readers do not hear about a non-gendered person. They hear us talking (or writing) about a male.

In my opinion, usage of English shouldn’t change when it conflicts with the ‘rules’. The rules were written down by people who were either trying to write down how English is used, or by people who wanted to force English into how *they* wanted it to be. English does not follow rules. Rules describe English. We forget this at our peril. Where rules and the actual use of the language collide, the rules are clearly wrong.

MORE INFORMATION

You might also want to read what Cecil Adams has to say on the subject at http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a3_245b.html

Jerry

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Version 1.1, March 2000

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