



CORRESPONDENCE/Memorandum

To: Cabinet Agencies
From: Department of Administration
Subject: State of Wisconsin Gender-Neutral Language Guidance

Background and Purpose

On June 1, 2021, the Governor issued [Executive Order 121](#) Relating to State Agency Use of Gender-Neutral Language.

The order directs each Cabinet Agency to use gender-neutral language when practicable in external documents, defined as documents created by a Cabinet Agency for use by the general public or a class of people. This includes administrative rules, guidance documents, manuals, websites, and other similar written communications. Using gender-neutral language includes using inclusive terms, gender-inclusive pronouns, drafting to eliminate the need for pronouns or superfluous gendered words and avoiding reference to gender family relations to the extent allowable by state and federal law.

“Gender-neutral” or gender-inclusive language avoids reference to a particular sex or gender. This includes the use of nouns that are not gender-specific to refer to roles or professions, formation of phrases in co-equal manner, and minimizing or discontinuing the collective use of male or female terms.

Agencies should apply this guidance when updating or creating external documents. This guidance also applies to visual representations.

Strategies

- 1. Use the singular “they” (with its associated forms of “them,” “their,” and “themselves”) instead of the gendered “he or she.”** The singular “they” is grammatically correct and should be used to refer to an unspecified person, a person whose pronouns are unknown, or a person who uses they/them pronouns. The gender-neutral pronoun “who” can also be deployed when using they.

Replace: Before a resident fills out **his/her** application, **he/she** should check the eligibility requirements.

With: Before a resident fills out **their** application, **they** should check the eligibility requirements.

Or with: A resident **who** fills out an application should first check **their** eligibility.

- 2. Draft to eliminate the need for pronouns altogether.** Many times a sentence can be re-drafted so that pronouns are not necessary at all.

Replace: Before a resident fills out [their](#) application, [they](#) should check the eligibility requirements.

With: Before a resident fills out [an](#) application, eligibility requirements should be checked.

- 3. Omit unnecessary references to gender.** Do not include or call attention to gender, gender expression, appearance, or other identities unless expressly relevant to the content.

Examples:

- Use “humankind” instead of “mankind.”
 - Refer to a “police officer” instead of a “policeman” or “policewoman.”
 - A writer refers to “the reader” instead of “his reader.”
 - Avoid “guys” as a way to refer to mixed-gender groups.
 - Remove salutations that indicate gender in favor of addressing a person by first and last name.
- 4. Avoid making reference to gender family relations.** For example, use “spouse” or “partner” instead of “husband” or “wife”; use “parent” instead of “mother” or “father”, and sibling instead of “brother” or “sister”).
 - 5. If the external document contains a visual representation, balance images to reflect diverse genders.** The image should if possible represent diverse genders actively participating in all aspects of life at home, school, work, or within the community, and in positions of authority.