

# Nurse Author & Editor

Leslie H. Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN Editor-in-Chief

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## Finding Your Voice and Writing Well: Part II

### Finding Your Voice and Writing Well: Situating Others Within the Text

Peggy L. Chinn

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The second big challenge related to “voice” and a good writing style involves how you treat others in relation to your ideas. This article builds on the previous one titled “Finding Your Voice and Writing Well: Situating Yourself within Your Text” in the previous issue of *Nurse Author and Editor* by addressing how to use second-person pronouns, and other language conventions that are crucial in conveying your respect for people other than yourself.

Good writing appeals to all possible readers and draws them in as a respected member of your audience. When you shift to current standards of good writing that claim your own voice, you inevitably “speak” about and to other people. By addressing others directly, as I am illustrating in this paper, your own voice is clear

and explicit. This raises the challenge of pronouns for the others, which in the English language, are gender-specific. Unless you know for sure that the people you are addressing are all men, or all women, the pronouns you use must be gender-neutral and non-binary. The most common solution is to edit the text to the plural, since in the English language plural pronouns are gender-neutral. Other strategies include:

- Use the second person, as in, “You can use the second person to avoid sexist pronouns.”
- Omit the pronoun entirely, replace it with an article, or with a noun. Instead of, “The researcher can design her study using a table of random numbers,” use, “The study can be designed using a table of random numbers.”
- Do not use “she and he,” “her and his,” or the annoying “s/he.” A related strategy that is very annoying is the alternate use of the female and male pronouns in alternate paragraphs or chapters. This not only emphasizes gender binaries, it is also distracting and draws attention to a stilted grammatical style.
- Use the singular “they.” Until the mid-1700s when prescriptive grammarians of the English language began to enforce its exclusive use as a plural pronoun, the pronoun “they” was considered to be appropriate as a singular referent (Maggio, 1991). There is still resistance to this convention, but it is now widely accepted for both written and spoken English. For example, “No one in the class was asked to share their private journal.”

## **SUBTLE MESSAGES ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE**

One of the most important things you can do to improve your writing and at the same time develop your unique voice is to examine your writing very carefully to detect those spots where you are inadvertently conveying a message you do not intend, and to select language that more accurately carries your message about

people. Your messages about other people say much more about who you are than about the other people you are referencing. This is not merely a matter of being “politically correct”—it is a matter of showing your moral commitment to respect the dignity and humanity of other people. Here are a number of principles to examine:

***People first.*** Labels are disabling, and are generally considered inappropriate in good writing. One of the most subtly damaging labels is to use a diagnosis or condition as a label for the person. Therefore, a fundamental rule is to always acknowledge the person first, followed by any descriptive terms that reflect their circumstances, as in, “People who have/are living with diabetes or HIV/AIDS”—not the AIDS patient, or the diabetic.

Labels that convey a derivative identity are so common when referring to women, that often English language speakers do not recognize the loss of personhood that accompanies the use of such labels. Words such as “wife,” “mother,” or “widow,” used in phrases such as “the mothers in this study” are not inaccurate, but in this phrase the women are assumed to be mothers first, not people first. Use instead wording that puts the human persons (in this case women) first, as in, “The women in this study, all of whom were mothers. . . .”

***Descriptors and identifiers of others.*** “People first” implies that something comes after the central idea of “person.” That which comes next are the descriptors that locate people within a context, or that describe something about their unique circumstances, or the common ground that they share with others. Be careful about the descriptor terms that you use; people have the right to define themselves, and to select the descriptors that best identify who they are. For example, if you are writing about people who identify as gender-queer, regardless of your personal identity, you are responsible to acknowledge the range of preferred terms and descriptors used by the people you are writing about. If you

are writing about women who are lesbians, recognize that some may prefer to use the word “gay” or “trans\*” to self-identify. In order to acknowledge these differences, use a phrase like “women who self-identify as gender-queer, gay, trans\*, or lesbian.” The preferred language requires more words, but, reflects a more accurate descriptive language that acknowledges the personhood of the people first, and their right to self-definition.

**Hidden bias.** Hidden bias occurs when the terms used are neutral and free of bias, but the passage still carries a biased message. For example, the sentence “More women today are living with men without being married” carries a bias against women who are not married ([Maggio, 1991](#)). The fact is that the number of men who are living with women in an unmarried arrangement equals the number of women in such arrangements. A more accurate statement would be “More heterosexual couples are living together today without being married.”

Another common example is the non-parallel treatment of ethnicity. The “white and non-white” dichotomy conveys the importance of being white, since everyone else is lumped together in one “non-white” category. Since ancestry and ethnicity are complex dimensions that are becoming increasingly individualized, a preferred approach is to identify ancestral heritage by general geographic origin (for example Asian, African, Pacific-Islander, South American). If a specific cultural, national, ethnic or ancestral heritage is more accurate to the people that you are referring to, use the more specific terminology as closely allied with the preference of the people involved as possible.

**Inclusion/exclusion of others.** The inclusion/exclusion principle refers to language that is accurate in terms of who is included and who is not included. The descriptor and identifiers described above reach in the direction of being inclusive of all audiences and acknowledging the diversity within that audience. However, in reaching toward inclusion, it is easy to use language that projects a certain point of

view on all people. The principle of inclusion/exclusion appears deceptively simple, while in reality, it requires deep reflection and usually several revisions of text in order to achieve precisely accurate language, and to locate alternatives to generally acceptable language.

Consider the following examples:

- *Abortion rights or reproductive rights.* “Abortion rights” usually implies the experience of women who wish to have the right to obtain an abortion, and excludes women who are concerned about the use of abortion as an involuntary means of genocide, or about involuntary sterilization. Even if your intention is to limit your concern only to abortion, if you are sensitive to issues of involuntary abortion, your preferred term would be “reproductive rights.”
- *Parenting.* The term “parent” is assumed to be an inclusive term referring to mothers and fathers. However, all too often, the term is used when the writer is referring to women who are mothers. When all the parents in a situation are mothers, or, when the author is assuming the parents to be the mothers, then the exclusive term “mother” is more accurate. If most of the parents are mothers and a few are fathers, then this proportion should be acknowledged in the text, rather than continuing to use the general term “parent” as if there were equal participation.
- *False inclusion.* A phrase like “participants can complete the instrument in less than 10 minutes” assumes that all participants can read at a certain grade level and are literate in the language in which the instrument is presented. The text may have specified limitations of the instrument, and it may be clear that the instrument is constructed in a given language. But without being specific about just which people can actually complete the instrument in a specified time frame, the phrase is inaccurately inclusive. Here are important examples of false inclusion:

- *“Immigrants”* to the US typically refers in actuality to Mexican, European or Asian people who arrived voluntarily in the country within a relatively recent time frame, without specifying who is included and who is excluded. Often “immigrants” implicitly refers only to people of brown skin who immigrated from the southern hemisphere of the Americas in recent years, when in fact it is inclusive of people arriving also from Europe, Asia (including southeast Asia), Australia, or New Zealand in any time period.

There is no English term to acknowledge people who were forcibly brought into the country, including those forced as slaves, including those forced to a new country as a sex slave. The term “immigrant” does not linguistically include these groups, and they are groups who are often ignored. Be specific as to who you are including, where they arrived from, and within which time frame. What else do you assume about the group? Are they all English-speaking, first generation, in the country legally?

The commonly used phrase “people of color” emerged in the English language in an effort to put people first, to avoid the obviously biased “non-white” term that casts “white” experience as the norm. However, the phrase still privileges white people by implying that anyone who is not white is “of color,” and homogenizes all people who do not claim a European ancestry and sustains a false inclusion based on ethnic or ancestral heritage.

## **SEX AND GENDER**

There is persistent confusion in the English language concerning sex and gender. “Sex” refers to a person’s biological characteristics of male or female. “Gender” refers to socially and culturally acquired roles that are dominantly feminine or masculine (Eliason & Chinn, 2015). The fundamental grammatical rule in using these two terms is one of accuracy. If you are writing about biological

characteristics, then use the terms male or female. If you are writing about acquired social and cultural roles, you can accurately use the term “gender.” The terms “man” and “woman” are generally considered to be related to gender roles but are usually also assumed to reflect sex. If you are including people who consider themselves gender non-conforming, or gender-queer, you need to include these non-binary alternatives as well.

Non-sexist language, or language that does not carry a bias or stereotype based on sex or gender, requires the use of gender and sex-neutral terms when possible, and accurate use of specific terms referring to men and women, girls and boys, females and males. There are a number of issues to be aware of in order to achieve accurate non-sexist use of language.

***Point of reference.*** The most common sexist error is the assumption that “male” and “men” (usually white, middle or upper-class) are the norm, or the point of reference. The phrase “equal opportunity” is a quintessential example from early feminist literature, and persists in many venues today. The question, “Equal to whom?” reveals the bias inherent in the phrase. For example, the phrase “equal access to education” most often would imply that women (or other disenfranchised groups) are being granted access to educational opportunities that previously were reserved for (white) men. The access that men have enjoyed is considered to be the norm toward which the disenfranchised group would aspire. Generally, this is considered to be a “good thing.” However, upon closer examination, feminist scholars for decades have raised questions concerning the nature of traditional education, the sexist bias that persists in these very institutions, and the desirability of conforming to the patriarchal norms inherent in these institutions (Nightingale, 1852/1979; Woolf, 1966).

***Gender and sex-free language.*** Gender and sex-free terms are those that can be used for either men or women, males or females. Some such terms, however, also

carry general assumptions about gender or sex, such as secretary, teacher, or nurse (assumed to be women), and doctor, lawyer, or merchant (assumed to be men). Generally, these terms are now preferred as generic gender-free terms without any sex-qualifiers, except when sex or gender is important to the meaning of the text. Such terms as “male nurse” or “woman doctor” are unacceptable. The test of such terms is to consider the symmetrical phrase “female nurse” or “male doctor.” If the symmetrical term is ridiculous, then both are ridiculous.

***Gender-fair language.*** When sex or gender is pertinent and appropriate, gender-fair language should be used. Gender-fair language involves the accurate, symmetrical use of gender-specific language for both men and women (Maggio, 1991). For example, consider the symmetrical structure of this statement: “The survey showed that men are comfortable with a nurse who is female, while women are less accepting of a nurse who is male.” Notice the use of the “people first” principle, instead of the unacceptable sexist term “male nurse.”

***Gender-specific language.*** Gender-specific terms are neither good nor bad in themselves, but they need to be used accurately. Use “businessmen” if all the people you refer to are men. “Businesspeople” is a preferred gender-neutral term if indeed the gender of the people include both men and women in approximately equal numbers. However, since “business” people still typically arouse images of male persons, and since it remains true in most contexts that the majority of those to whom the term refers are still men, it is likely to be more accurate to use the more wordy phrase “business men and women” which also emphasizes the fact that women are indeed business people.

***Pseudo-generic language.*** Pseudo-generic terms are those that are used as if they refer to both men and women, but in fact they do not. The context of the writing typically reveals the error. For example, the phrase “clergy who are permitted to have wives” reveals that the author actually uses the generic term

“clergy” to refer to heterosexual men. A more inclusive phrase would be “clergy who are permitted to have spouses or domestic partners.”

A more subtle context that reveals the author’s bias occurs when the generic term is used for several passages, and then a gender-specific passage occurs that reveals the fact that the generic term really only referred to men or women all along. This has been common with the supposedly generic use of the term “man.” If the author indeed were to mean both men and women, then when women enter the picture, they would not need to switch to the gender-specific use of the term “women,” but inevitably, they do.

The same shift is common in lay texts that use the term “parent.” Initially, it may seem that the author means mothers and fathers. However, along the way a passage will single out fathers, revealing the underlying pseudo-generic use of the term “parent” when in fact the author meant “mother.” Usually an extended reading of the text reveals the bias, or, if you substitute the term “woman” for the term “man” or “father” for the terms “parent” throughout the text, the bias becomes quite clear.

***Feminine endings.*** Endings added to words to indicate female sex or gender are particularly damaging, in that they perpetuate the assumption that the male is the norm, specify a person’s sex when it is irrelevant, and imply a diminutive, “cute” sense of the term. The inappropriateness of the feminine ending is often revealed when one considers the term that is considered male, or generic. Often, the parallel term carries a vastly different meaning, such as “governess,” compared to “governor.” Other parallel terms are not as dramatic in their vastly different meanings, but convey a gender-specific role that is less than favorable for women, such as “seducer” compared to “seductress.”

## CONCLUSION

To write well, you need to find your own voice. This is a far greater challenge than simply writing with first person pronouns, or expressing your own opinions. It is a complex challenge for all of your writing. Your “voice” tells your readers who you are as a person—the way you view other people in the world, and how you view your own self. The messages are subtle, but they carry messages of utmost importance that form the public image of who you are, what you stand for, and the values you bring to your work.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peggy L. Chinn, PhD, RN, FAAN is the Editor-in-Chief of *Advances in Nursing Science*, author of a few books, and manager or co-manager of several websites/blogs, including INANE. She is an Author-in-Residence for *Nurse Author & Editor*.

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