

Grammar and Style Tips: Gender Problems

Some solutions to sexist language are more graceful than others. To avoid a profusion of “she or he” and “his or her” in your writing—or worse, “she/he” or “his/her” (the slash being frowned upon in formal writing), try these alternatives:

1. Switch to the plural whenever possible, since it’s gender-neutral. Be sure to change all the relevant pronouns.

See how switching to the plural would clean up the following paragraph:

When a child bounces from one foster home to another, he or she can become moody or depressed. His or her schoolwork may suffer. The chancery judge, having issued an initial court order, may have little idea how his or her directive plays out. The caseworker is probably burdened with more cases than he or she can handle. The attorney ad litem tries to speak on the child’s behalf, but has very little control over the ultimate result of his or her advocacy. Meanwhile the foster parent himself or herself is at the end of his or her rope over the magnitude of the challenges involved.

2. Switch back and forth—use “she” for some of your examples, when you mean “a person” or “one.”

When the writer begins a short story, she often has no idea where it’s going to go.

3. Use “humanity” instead of “man” or “mankind.”