

# GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IN STATUTORY, OFFICIAL AND LEGAL DOCUMENTS

## Towards Best Practice - Guidelines for Implementation

This Project is founded with the belief that if you take care of the pronouns, the nouns will eventually take care of themselves. We explain what is needed by adopting the following definitions:

**Gender-specific pronouns** are 'he, him, his'.

**Gender-inclusive pronouns** are 'he or she', 'him or her', 'his or hers' (or he/she, him/her, his/hers)

**Gender-neutral language** entirely avoids these pronouns, and documents are expressed more appropriately, and elegantly too, for statutory, official and legal purposes, in impersonal language.

We are aiming to reflect the population as a whole – in which the numbers of women and men are more-or-less equal. Strictly **gender-neutral language** will provide a standard of impersonal expression appropriate for the statutory, legal, and other official documents under consideration. This approach is bound to entail total reconstruction of a few sentences in order to sidestep the need for gendered pronouns, without detriment to the sense — but it seems likely that the process will soon become automatic. Adjustment of the pronouns alone will effectively ensure that every statutory or legal document will apply to each citizen without question. Implementation can be achieved in a number of complementary ways:

- (1) In a surprising number of cases, a gender-specific pronoun can be replaced by 'a', 'the', 'this' or 'that';
- (2) References to people in the singular can be turned to the plural;
- (3) Sentences with an active verb can be turned into the passive form;
- (4) Non-subjective terms can be adopted, such as 'one', 'individual', 'person';
- (5) It may be possible to omit the gendered pronoun, or (occasionally) the phrase containing the pronoun;
- (6) The sentence can be inverted so as to use 'who' instead of the conditional 'if [the person]';
- (7) A change of tense (to future or past) can occasionally be introduced, which will not affect the meaning.

NOTE that it is all too easy to substitute the pronouns THEY, THEM, THEIR (as people do, colloquially, in speaking). Before 1850, this usage was quite common and examples occur in various writers of standing, including Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>. However, the usage is controversial to the extent that there remains a hard core of entrenched grammarians who still believe it to be prohibited – though its future adoption seems irreversible, according to Fowler<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, we advise that these pronouns should not be used in this way, except in cases when the drafter is highly skilled; consequently this alternative will be discussed separately in an Appendix. While there remain traditionalists who are likely to object, the change must be made in another way until proposed readers have had time to get accustomed to this development — analogous with the situation in the past when 'you' superseded 'thou'.

We invite constructive criticism – and of course further suggestions are welcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (second edition 1989), Vol. XVII.

<sup>2</sup> Fowler's Modern English Usage, revised 3rd edition by R W Burchfield, 2004 (p.776-9).