

**DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL**  
**COURSE OF STUDY**

**GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE\***

The decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an argument at all, that language merely reflects existing social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail. Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority.

— George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

As George Orwell notes, language reflects our social reality, but language can change. Today we are more acutely aware that our use of language is gendered, and that the use of exclusively gendered language—that which always uses male nouns and pronouns for non-male subjects—can be harmful and exclusionary. Therefore, all members of the Duke Divinity School community (students, faculty, administrators, and staff) are invited to use language that most adequately reflects the unity of the people of God and the reality of God.

**LANGUAGE ABOUT PERSONS**

**GENERAL USAGE**

Traditionally “man” has been used to mean not only “adult males” but also human beings in general, but this is no longer the case. “Man” is now viewed as what we call an “exclusive” use of language; that is, it is seen as *excluding* women. Therefore, we recommend that you find other ways to refer to humankind in general and use terms that are *inclusive*. For example, instead of *man* and *mankind*, consider using:

*humans, people, persons, everyone, men and women, children of God, etc.*

Similarly, if you are referring to occupations and positions that can include both males and females, keep in mind these alternatives:

<i>clergyman</i>	→	<i>clergy/clergyperson</i>
<i>chairman</i>	→	<i>chair/chairperson</i>
<i>congressman</i>	→	<i>representative</i>
<i>policeman</i>	→	<i>police officer</i>
<i>mailman</i>	→	<i>mail carrier</i>
<i>stewardess</i>	→	<i>flight attendant</i>
<i>authoress</i>	→	<i>author</i>

## PRONOUN USAGE

When a pronoun is used to refer to a particular gendered person, clearly we need to use “he” or “she,” “him” or “her,” etc. However, what should we do when we refer to a nonspecific individual—a pastor, a journalist, a janitor, etc.? Again, traditionally, “he” has been the pronoun of choice, but this is no longer the case if we value inclusiveness.

- One way to solve the problem is make use of **both male and female pronouns**—“he and she,” “hers and his,” or combinations such as “he/she,” “s/he,” and “his/hers.” For example:
  - *A pastor is called to take care of his/her congregation.*
  - *He/she must also master the art of preaching.*

Or we can **alternate female and male pronouns**:

- *A person should take good care of her car. He should check the oil level daily. She should also make sure that the tires are properly inflated.*

However, both these approaches can be cumbersome.

- A better way to go is to recast, whenever possible, what you want to say in the **third-person plural** (*they/their/them*):
  - *Pastors are called to take care of their congregation.*
  - *They must also master the art of preaching.*

or **second-person**:

- *Writing a sermon takes time, so it is important you do not procrastinate.*
- *You must try to avoid sin.*

However, keep in mind that third-person and second-person pronouns can in some circumstances work in a distancing or “objectifying” way—*They* are sinners/*You* are a sinner; *They/You* do not participate in the work of the Lord—and so put us in a position of seeming superiority. If this is the case, we might want to make use of **first-person plural pronouns** (*we/our/us*):

- *We are sinners.*
- *Our efforts are meagre without the help of the Lord.*

On the other hand, *you* sometimes signals intimacy. Judgment is always necessary!

- Another option is to use the **ungendered pronoun “one.”** This is still found in many cases of formal usage, but keep in mind that it can sound rather stilted in everyday contexts and will alter the tone of your writing:
  - *One should attend church as frequently as possible.*
- **Eliminating pronouns** can also yield gender-neutral language. Thus
  - *The average American drives his car to work can become  
The average American drives to work.*

## FORMS OF ADDRESS

Customary titles given to women—**Mrs.** or **Miss**—signal their marital status, while the title given to men—**Mr.**—does not. Today women differ in how they prefer to be addressed (and in general, try to conform to how the addressee wishes to be addressed—if this is known), but we now have the option of **Ms**, which is neutral with regard to marital status. Alternatively, in more relaxed contexts, use of **no title at all** is quite acceptable:

- *Lorna Stafford*
- *Ms. Lorna Stafford*
- *The Reverend Ms. Louise Lind, etc.*

Different titles should be recognized when addressing married couples (below, a title in parentheses should be considered optional):

- *Clergywoman married to a layperson: The Reverend (Ms) Sally Jones and Mr. Gerald Jones*
- *Clergy couples: The Reverends (Ms) Sally Smith and (Mr.) Gerald Jones*
- *Other titles: Professor Louise Lind and Dr. Jonathan Smith; Drs. Cynthia and Jackson Whittaker*

Use individual first names for a married couple who shares a last name:

- *Steve and Lorna Jackson*
- *Mr. and Mrs. Steve and Lorna Jackson (not Mr. and Mrs. Steve Jackson)*

but be aware that married couples do not always share a last name:

- *Steve Jackson and Lorna Stafford*

Also, be mindful to use forms of address in a **parallel and equal manner**:

- *Not Judge William West and Mrs. Cynthia Williams (when both are judges) –*
- *Judges William West and Cynthia Williams*

## USE OF COLLECTIVE AND ABSTRACT NOUNS

Social institutions (e.g., the Church), concepts (evil, etc.) and inanimate objects (a car, a ship, and so on) do not have a gender, although we may frequently read texts—especially historical texts—that do give them a gender. Use judgment about whether to gender, say, the Church, but keep in mind that referring to something as male or female does encourage stereotyping.

For example, if you are writing a historical or scholarly essay on the medieval church, referring to it as “she” might be appropriate if you are describing what writers of that period have to say about the institution. Also, if you are directly quoting from a text that gives a gender to neuter terms:

- “*And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*” (Rev. 21:2)

you must quote accurately and retain the gendered description. However, in a paraphrase, it is permissible to rewrite:

- *In this verse, the church—the New Jerusalem—is adorned for the worship of God.*

Also, while direct quotations must be accurate, interpolating (that is, adding your own words framed by square brackets) can make a quote more inclusive:

- “*A person must make his [or her] own way in this broken world.*”

## LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD

In the Christian tradition God has generally been referred to as He. However, it is useful to reflect theologically on the variety and richness of God’s being and God’s manifestations to humans. The suggestions below are offered as a beginning point for developing a more inclusive language about God:

- The exclusive use of either masculine or feminine pronouns for God should be avoided
- Metaphors showing God’s personal relationship with humans should be used, but need not be gendered:
  - *God is parent to us all*
- *God* and *Godself* can be used as substitutes for he/she and him-/herself:
  - *After God created the world, God rested*
  - *God knew Godself to be great*
- A variety of gender-specific metaphors can be used:
  - *God is the father who welcomes his son, but she is also the woman for search for the lost coin*

Referring to God in gender-neutral language can sound clumsy, but this is largely due to the fact that we are in a transitional period with our use of language. Imagination, patience, and diligence are required in order to use language that expands and enriches our understanding of God.

\* This Guideline is based on guidelines for inclusive language, Appendix 1 of the *Duke Divinity School Bulletin*, found at: <https://divinity.duke.edu/admissions/divinity-bulletin>