

## Business Writing: Sexist Language

By Dónal Thompson



No writer can hide behind the status quo. The world changes and a professional business communicator must change with it. Sexist language is confusing at best and offensive at worst. Anyone who works at a keyboard should avoid it.

It used to be common to use masculine pronouns in all business communication. That is no longer acceptable. Many writers now use the format 'he/she' or even 's/he'. This is well-intentioned but not ideal. Let's look at an example:-

*When a sales representative goes home he will often work in the evening.*

*Well, this is clearly sexist as we are assuming that the worker is male.*

When a sales representative goes home he/she will often work in the evening.

This is better but looks a bit forced.

If you are a sales representative, when you go home you will often work in the evening.

This is much better. It avoids both sexism and clumsiness and comes across as more personal.

You can avoid sexism by using the third person plural too.

Each director will receive *their* copy after the meeting.

Of course, if you know that all the directors are male or all are female you can quite correctly say

Each director will receive *her* copy after the meeting.

Don't assume that all secretaries are women and all construction workers are men. They are not.

In 2008 we don't use words like 'air hostess' or 'stewardess'. The suffix '-ess' suggests something less. We use the term 'Flight Attendant'. We don't use the term 'chairman', we use 'chairperson' or even simpler, 'chair'.

In writing the term 'Ms' refers to a woman without referring to her marital status. After all, if a woman is married or not has not relevance to the world of business. Some women prefer to be addressed as 'Mrs' or 'Miss' and, of course, this should always be respected. But if in doubt, use 'Ms'.

Some people (usually men) think we should not change the language in this way. But it is not about 'political correctness'. It is about efficient business communication. If you write from a male oriented point of view, you will alienate half your readers. How good is that for business?