

Writing About People Respectfully

Writers can find a lot of ways to embarrass themselves when they write about people: for starters, they can use out-of-date names, discriminatory language, and belittling terms. Because these mistakes impact a writer's credibility, great writers pay attention to these concerns. Correct references to people don't need to be mannered or awkward. They just need to be accurate and up to date.

Ten ways to avoid putting your foot in your mouth:

1. Use language inclusive of all gender identities when referring to particular jobs or actions. Consider this:

Many pirates were accomplished *swordsmen*.

Sure, a lot of pirates were male. But some weren't. This is more accurate:

Many pirates were accomplished *smashbucklers*.

These mistakes occur when people assume that professions are gender-specific. Certain professions may be dominated by particular genders, but gender-inclusive language can help you avoid both alienating minority gender identities and perpetuating gender inequities in that profession.

2. Use plural pronouns so you don't have to use gendered language you may not mean.

The reader might notice *her* attention wandering during the scene.

Are all readers of the scene in question female? Unlikely.

Readers might notice *their* attention wandering during the scene.

3. Use the singular *they* to refer to non-binary individuals and as a gender-neutral pronoun.

Everyone must take *his* seat.

Everyone is a singular indefinite pronoun, and for agreement purposes, people have used the singular pronoun *his* to refer back to everyone. But *his* excludes other gender identities, so unless you know everyone in the group is male, use the singular *they* instead as a gender-inclusive singular pronoun.

Everyone must take *their* seat.

The use of *they* as a singular pronoun has a long history stretching back to the fourteenth century, and in the twenty-first century, the singular *they* has gained wide-spread acceptance by style guides, dictionaries, and writing centers.

4. Try *humans* or *people* instead of *man* or *mankind*.
5. Look it up: Proper names for people and groups change over time, so take time to check. Consult authorities from the groups of people themselves to determine how they self-identify. It would, for example, be considered a racial slur to use the word formerly commonplace to refer to the Inuit.
6. Exercise care when using terms that have been reclaimed by marginalized groups. If you are not part of that group, using a term that was once derogatory but has since been reclaimed could cause offense.
7. Nix feminine word endings. A *poetess* has the same job as a *poet*, and she does not need to be singled out with a suffix.

8. Narrow it down. Many potentially offensive terms are very broad. To avoid them, be precise. Using the specific name of the tribe you're referencing, for example, would be better than using a blanket term for indigenous peoples.
9. Say what you mean. Often euphemisms are out-of-date, and sometimes they're offensive. So come right out with it: people aren't *ungentlemanly*; they're rude. Frightened people are not *unmanned*; they're scared.
10. Don't use derogatory terms. Even if you think you're funny, you can't know if your audience will think so.
11. Use colloquialisms with care. Claiming someone *went postal* casts aspersions on the good people of the US Postal Service, and is unclear to readers unfamiliar with the phrase.
12. If you're tempted to defend your right to make a statement ("I'm not biased; some of my best friends are..."), know that you're on unsteady ground. Proceed with caution, if at all.