

Reading Passage

When to Use Female Nouns

by Mignon Fogarty

Today's topic is the use of feminine nouns such as "actress" and «comedienne:'. These days, people often see such terms as sexist, but it's also common to hear at least some of them. So what exactly are the modern rules for using such terms? Actually, this isn't a matter of s grammar. It's about writing to minimize the potential for readers to draw conclusions¹ you don't want to convey.

Other Languages Have More Feminine Nouns

It could be worse. In some languages, most nouns have different forms for different sexes. For example, in Spanish, a male lawyer is an abogado, ¹⁰and a female lawyer is an abogada. Furthermore, in some languages, even verbs can have different forms, depending on the sex of their subject. In Hebrew, *raa* means "saw" for masculine subjects, while *raata* means "saw" for feminine subjects. In Mandarin Chinese, a man can "marry" a woman, but a woman can only "be married to" a man.

¹⁵Even in English, there used to be more female-specific nouns than there are now. Centuries ago, people used now-obsolete² nouns such as "teacheress:," "soldieress;," and "ministress:." The fact that English has mostly abandoned female-specific nouns like these is probably part of the reason that the remaining ones tend to attract attention.

¹draw conclusions reach an opinion or belief about something

²obsolete no longer used because it is out of date

²⁰Paired Nouns Are OK

Sometimes male- and female-specific nouns don't suggest problematic messages. Pairs such as "prince" and "princess;," "duke" and "duchess:,"³ "abbot" and "abbess"⁴ are unobjectionable.s In these pairs, the malespecific term never refers to both males and females. Even though it ^{2s} might be convenient to have a word to refer to any child of a king or

queen, "prince" can only mean a king or queen's son. So, if the sexes are treated equally, each one having its own term, the female-specific term is probably OK.

Some Gender-Neutral Nouns, Such as "Flight Attendant":

30Have Become Standard

The next-easiest cases are those where a gender-neutral term has become popular. In recent decades, gender-neutral terms, such as "firefighter," "police officer," "mail carrier," and "flight attendant" have gained currency.⁶ Definitely use these.

35Problems Arise When a Noun Exists to Call Out Only One Sex

The troublesome cases are when we have one term that can refer to either sex, and another that refers only to women. Take the word "author." It can refer to men or women in a sentence such as, "Our agency represents many authors." But if you use "author" to refer to writers of either sex, and the exclusively feminine "authoress" to refer to female authors, you now have a way of referring specifically to female authors, but no way of referring specifically to male authors. The implication is that most authors are male, and that it's worth pointing out when one of them isn't. As *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* says, "45The marked term suggests some difference in status and may imply lower standards or achievement".

Is There Ever a Good Reason to Write "Female Doctor?"

This issue comes up even when there aren't gender-specific terms. For example, "doctor" can be either masculine or feminine. Sally McConnell-Ginet, a linguist at Cornell University who specializes in language and gender, advises, "If you write 'female doctor; then ask yourself why you want to emphasize that a certain doctor is a woman. Do you write 'male doctor' in similar contexts?" Her point is that sexism in society makes it easy to send messages in our word choice that we don't intend to send.

3duke | duchess a man | woman with a noble or very high rank

4abbot | abbess the leader of a group of monks | nuns

5unobjectionable not offensive

6gained currency started being believed, accepted, or used by many people

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55Make Sure Your Words Are Relevant

The guideline suggested in Garner's *Modern American Usage* and The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage is to avoid using a gender-specific noun unless sex is relevant to the discussion. Usually it isn't. Sex doesn't typically matter when you're talking about doctors or authors, for example.

60But what about when sex is relevant? Another case in point: "actress":

Male and female actors usually play different kinds of roles, so it's useful for people in show business to make this distinction. If "actress" saves them from having to use "female actor," why not use it?

Unfortunately, even if you follow this guideline of using gender-neutral

65noun forms in most cases, and gender-specific nouns only when sex is relevant, the problem remains. You'll end up using female-specific terms to talk specifically about women, but where's the analogous

70there is sometimes a good reason to use the word "actress" that hasn't

stopped it from acquiring negative connotations,⁸ as we're told by a contact in the industry.

In cases like these, where linguistic change is ongoing, the usage of the audience you're writing for can be a good guide. If a certain community

75uses "actress" where they are clearly not devaluing⁹ women's acting, feel free to do likewise. If they insist on "actor" across the board, you may want to follow suit. 10

Summary

If there's a gender-neutral term in general use, use it. If there's not, but so the masculine and feminine nouns each stay in their own territory, then use them. Be careful when one term can refer to either sex, another term refers only to women, and no term refers only to men. In these cases, avoid referring to a person's sex if possible, and if it's not, carefully assess the usage of your audience. But remember that these "rules" are just BS shortcuts: what matters is getting across the messages you want to send and trying to block those you don't.