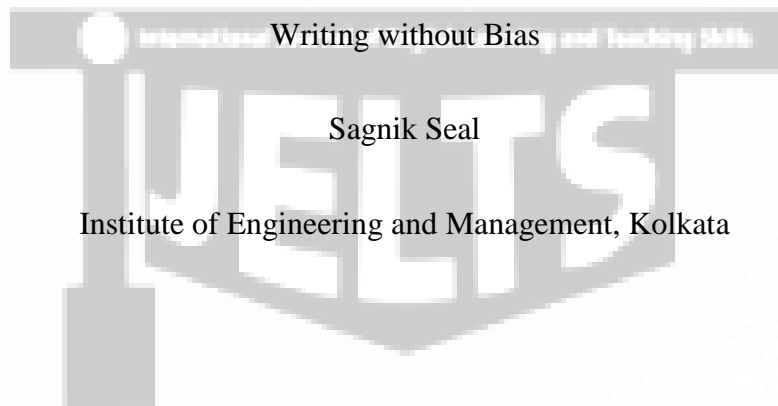Writing without Bias

Sagnik Seal

Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

Abstract

Enlightened persons look upon all human beings as their kith and kin. Liberal outlooks and good manners forbid them from harboring any preconceived idea about anybody on grounds of gender, race, religion, caste, community, age and disability (physical or mental). Yet some writers every now and then slyly hint at the presumed superiority of one group of people over another without any rational basis. They tend to judge others by their own cultural yardsticks. They are too insular to realize that anyone who may just be different from them in some ways are as important members of human society as any of their own kind.

When bias exists in attitudes, it seeps through language. Language often turns out to be the cultural filter through which we construct what we consider as 'normal.' Our choice of words and expressions are often loaded with implicit prejudice. They betray our insensitivity to the feelings of others. If you are not mindful about weeding out hurtful expressions from your writing, your message will offend a large section of your readers.

Keywords: - words, writers, language, expressions, readers.

Writing without Bias

Introduction

Choose your words carefully to create an inclusive environment. Scornful words upset your readers. Sometimes it means leaving out certain expressions all together, such as not describing someone's physical characteristics or caste when doing so serves no purpose. This does not mean that we should abolish certain words or alter historically established texts. It only suggests that for the sake of fairness, we should pause and consider the value-neutral alternatives.

Choose words that treat people with courtesy. Root out words that carry an unfair element of surprise such as "smart and dedicated woman." Is it unusual that someone who is smart and dedicated is also a woman? If an individual must be so described, consider applying the same description to every other individual mentioned in your writing. A person who has AIDS is not a victim but rather an AIDS patient or a person living with AIDS. And, not all people over the age 70 are ready for the stereotypical rocking chair.

Business writers remove from their writings all spiteful expressions that might offend their readers. They refer to a person by category only when it is relevant to the discussion in hand. Any time you have to refer to a group of people to the exclusion of others, you must be cautious not to use language, regarded as odious by the group being referred to. Offensive language not only insults the person or the group to which it is applied but it also foments a feeling of alienation and discord. Malicious expressions convey a biased view of the reality. When replacement for such a word is not obvious, the sentence can be reorganized to communicate the intended meaning with a pleasant tone.

The power of language to hurt is often noticeable in the realm of racial slurs or epithets. Civil society has cleansed long back offensive words like Negro, blind, handicapped and elderly from its lexicon. It has replaced them with less offensive words like black, visually impaired, physically challenged, and senior citizens. Business writers reflect cultural sensitivity in their choice of words. They use non-discriminatory language.

In this era of globalized business, no organization can assume that all its employees would be drawn only from a single society and culture. Employees worldwide reflect today difference in age, caste, language, race and gender. Reasonable and value free words can blunt the parochial attitude and forge an assorted group of people into a team.

Gender Bias

Language plays a key role in reinforcing unfair difference in the treatment of women. Many expressions emphasize a value system that takes male supremacy for granted. English lacks a third person singular pronoun or possessive adjective applying neutrally to both sexes. Words that refer to women often devolve in meaning, frequently taking on sexual overtones. Female gender maybe be designated either by tagging on a feminine descriptor (e.g. women doctor, female engineer) or by suggesting a stereotypically female group (e.g. kindergarten teacher).

Gender-biased language reflects an unequal state of society. When everyone is manning the post, showing sportsmanship and doing a man-sized job, it is clear this is the language of a world slanted towards the male species. The use of man or mankind to represent humanity collectively is unfair. Such expressions render women invisible.

Sexist language discriminates between men and women in ability and occupation. In today's society, women are equal partners of men in every sphere of human endeavor. Stay away from stereotypical and chauvinistic language about women. It betrays a feudal attitude. Incorrect: 'Although she was beautiful, Madhuri was still intelligent.' Revised: 'Madhuri was intelligent.' There is no link beauty and intelligence. Second, will you refer to a man in the same way?

<u>Words which assume all people are male</u>

DONT USE		DO USE
Mankind	-	humankind, human beings, humanity, people
Manmade	-	synthetic, manufactured, machine-made
The man in the street	-	the average person, the ordinary person
The desk is manned	-	staffed
Actress	-	actor
Postman	-	postal workers
Businessman	-	businessperson
Chairman	-	chairperson
Forefathers	-	ancestors
Managers and their wives	-	managers and their spouses

Language and Age

Ageing, and particularly becoming old, are sometimes looked down upon in certain societies as degrading and debilitating. Some people are perhaps obsessed with the idea of perpetual youth. However, it is unacceptable to show disrespect or disregard for individuals on grounds of age. Keep away from typecasting older people as frail, incapable of independence, a burden on society or no longer active or productive. Similarly, avoid stereotyping young people as inexperienced, rebellious, immature or always vibrant.

Discrimination on grounds of age relies on stereotypical assumptions. Expressed in language and applied to a group, it betrays biased communication. Much of the time, it's not necessary to use age as an identifier at all. Mention age only when relevant. Labelling people over 65 as feeble, geriatric, senile or the elderly is inappropriate. Like everyone else, people over 60 are individuals with varied interests, lifestyles and health. This individuality should be reflected in the language used about them. Replace such depreciatory words with neutral words like 'older people' or 'elderly patients'. Many continue in employment and study, and make contributions to the community.

When writing to avoid bias, be cautious about euphemisms. A euphemism is a mild word that is substituted for an expression thought to be offensive or blunt. Avoid such words when they are used derisively as a means of mocking political correctness. Though they have their place (as when a speaker or writer is genuinely trying to be sensitive to another's feelings), euphemisms can be necessarily wordy and indirect. Therefore, when avoiding bias, use euphemisms discreetly.

Inappropriate Language	Appropriate Language
The disabled, the blind, the deaf	People with disabilities, the disability community, the blind community, the deaf community
Crippled, suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, invalid	Has a disability, is a person with a disability, person with a physical disability, uses a cane
Normal person, healthy, whole	Non-disabled, person without disabilities, able-bodied
Impaired, impairment	Disabled, has a disability
Hearing impaired, hearing impairment, "the deaf"	Deaf, hard of hearing, person who is deaf

Language and Ethnicity

The traditional definition of race and ethnicity relates to biological and sociological factors. Race refers to a person's physical appearance, such as skin color, eye color, hair color, bone and jaw structure. Ethnicity, on the other hand, relates to cultural factors such as nationality, culture, ancestry, language and beliefs. Racial and cultural stereotypes degrade others. Blatantly derogatory statements, such as racial slurs, are unacceptable in any context.

Words, referring to racial type as terms of abuse, suggest discrimination. Weed out from your writing all references that suggest the dominant ethnic groups are the norm. Sensible persons weed out from their writing abbreviated colloquial forms referring to race (e.g. Paki, Yankee, Jap, Bongs, Gujjus, Bhaiya, etc.). The use of adjectives rather than nouns in describing groups is desirable. (E.g. the Marwari community, not the Marwaris, disabled people not the disabled). Similarly, alternative terms such as 'person of restricted growth' are now preferred over the term 'dwarf.'

Unless there is a justifiable reason for doing so, do not refer to the racial background of a person or group. Such terms as the 'western world' imply that everything is viewed from the standpoint of western Europe; use 'developed' or 'industrialized countries' instead. There is also an increasing tendency for the terms north and south to be used to suggest a particular stage of development. Usage of such terms should be restricted only to geographical contexts. Similarly, refer to 'developing countries' rather than 'underdeveloped countries' or 'the third world.'

Language and Disabilities

Over the years, people with disabilities have been identified solely by their disabling conditions—paraplegics, blind, schizophrenic, etc. Such descriptions emphasize the disability over the person. They also serve to set them apart from the rest of the community. Describing a person as handicapped focuses on only one aspect of the disabled people – their disability – while ignoring their social roles and human attributes.

"Putting people first" is a simple rule of thumb. Focus on the individual person rather than the disability. Mention disability only when it is relevant to the discussion. Collective terms as the disabled, the handicapped, the blind and the deaf equate people with their disabilities. Do not hide, ignore or downgrade the relevance of disability. Promote a fair, accurate and positive portrayal of people with disabilities. Put them into the perspective of a wide life experience.

How we write and speak about people with disabilities have a profound effect on the way society views them. Some words, by their very nature, humiliate people with disabilities. Others undermine their individuality. Affirmative language in describing individuals who have

disabilities can create a positive view of their contributions to society. Likewise, a contemptuous depiction can humiliate them. Many euphemisms – such as 'physically challenged,' 'differently abled' 'partially sighted' and 'physically inconvenienced' – have come into vogue. However, ensure that such references do not become too condescending.

Instead of:	Use:
Blind	A person with no vision is blind; one with some sight is partially sighted, visually impaired or have low vision – not partially blind.
Handicapped/ the disabled	A person with disability or people with disabilities.
Confined to the wheelchair (provides mobility for people who are unable to walk, it is not confining).	A person who uses a wheelchair/ a wheelchair user.
Mentally handicapped/ retarded/ victim of AIDS or AIDS sufferer.	A person who is HIV positive/ a person who has AIDS/ disabilities/intellectual disabilities.

Language is continually evolving, including the language related to people with disabilities. What you say and write may enhance the dignity of people with disabilities. It may also advertently reflect stereotypes and negative attitudes. Use words like 'victim' or 'sufferer' with restraint. Such expressions emphasize powerlessness. However, the term victim is acceptable in certain circumstances, such as when referring to instances of murder or natural disaster.

Do not define disability as a limitation. Remove words or phrases with negative connotation or anything that implies people with disability are different. Say, for example, 'uses a wheelchair' instead of 'confined to a wheelchair.' A person in a wheelchair is a 'wheelchair user' not 'confined to a wheelchair' or 'wheelchair-bound.'

Recognize what people with disabilities can do rather than focusing on their limitations, for example, the person walks with an aid, not that he or she has limited mobility. Many of the problems facing people with disability have been created by insensitive attitudes. If you label them in a derogatory way, it will serve to perpetual these stereotypes.

Conclusion

Writing without bias takes awareness, openness and practice. Many biased statements seem so natural and familiar that we are unaware of the discomfort they cause to others. Think of the words and phrases you use and what they may imply. With a little sense of fairness and practice, you can satisfy the grammarians, the feminists, the stylists, and even those who are annoyed by so called political correctness.