INTRODUCTION

For authors of writing guides, the question of how to approach issues such as sexist language and cultural bias has often been a vexed one. The most popular writing handbook (*A Writer's Reference*, by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers, 8e, 2016), includes a section entitled "Avoid sexist language," followed by a section entitled "Revise language that may offend groups of people." The first of these headings is surely unproblematic (we will come in a moment to the issue of gender and language). But what of the second? Should we really avoid all language that "may offend groups of people"? If so, George Orwell and Simone de Beauvoir and Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela should certainly not have spoken out as plainly as they did. If so, we should never use a phrase such as "the cruelties of factory farming," for it is surely offensive to most managers of what they would prefer to call "intensive farming operations" or "concentrated animal feeding operations." If so, we would have to be quite inventive in referring to the bitumen extraction industry in northern Alberta, since one group is offended if the phrase "tar sands" is used, while an equally large group is offended if the alternative term, "oil sands," is used. The point about non-sexist language and culturally sensitive language, then, is not that you should never be willing to use language that might offend. It is that you should try never to use language that stereotypes particular groups, or that presumes other groups to be inferior.

Another leading writing handbook—Andrea Lunsford's *The Everyday Writer* (5e, 2012) introduces this topic by referencing the so-called "golden rule"—*Do unto others as*

you would have them do unto you—a Christian concept that has parallels in numerous other religions. "The golden rule of language," writes Lunsford, "might be 'Speak to others the way you want them to speak to you.'" But surely this is precisely what we should *not* always do if we are truly to be considerate of others. A young person in the habit of using crude language might well prefer others to respond to him in the same way—to tell him that anything he has accomplished is "f—ing fantastic," for example. But in most cases it would be both inconsiderate and unwise of him to use the same language to his grandparents. Another young person might be pleased to hear from a friend that she looks really sexy in her new outfit. But it would in most cases be both inconsiderate and unwise of her to speak in the same way to a young woman wearing a nun's habit. The point, then, is not that we should do or say to others exactly what we would like them to do or say to us, but that we should be considerate of them, just as we would want them to be considerate to us. Rather than presuming others to be like us, we should try to think of how they might like to be treated, and of how that in many cases might be different from our own preferences.

This book has its origin in a section of *The Broadview Guide to Writing* that first appeared under the title "Bias-Free Language." That was a title we adopted in large part to get away from negatively focused headings such as "sexist language" or "biased language," or "the language of prejudice." But "bias-free" is a term that can perhaps too easily take on a self-congratulatory ring. We should surely all keep trying to find and use bias-free language, but we should also always try to remember that none of us will ever be entirely free of bias or prejudice—and that the struggle against it is

not only an ongoing one in society as a whole, but also a lifelong one within each one of us.

Most writing guides and handbooks inform the reader that certain usages "are considered" inappropriate (and provide a short list), but do not devote much space to explaining why. Our intent in this book is both to provide wider coverage of inappropriate usages than is available in a typical sort of writing guide, and to go into greater detail as to why they are considered inappropriate. In some cases, where there really is no consensus about what usage is best, we have chosen not to gloss over these uncertainties but to outline the debate so that writers using this guide can choose an informed position for themselves. We have also included at the end of each chapter a selection of cases for consideration, drawing attention to controversies and open questions regarding the ethical use of language; in a few of these, where even the authors of this book did not agree, we have presented contrasting viewpoints. We include substantial discussions of issues relating to gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability, non-human animals, and political controversy—but of course it would be impossible to cover every ethical consideration that might come up in writing. Our hope is that this guide will not just offer concrete advice about particular words and phrasings, but also demonstrate an approach to ethical writing that can be useful in all sorts of contexts.

Some General Principles

Relatively few people in North American society are overtly bigoted in the style that was routine a little over a century ago—though any visit to a news website's comments section

will demonstrate how far there is still to go. But the context in which such language is used has changed; well into the twentieth century it was still common to hear in respectable North American society language that was overtly sexist, or racist, or anti-Jewish, or anti-Catholic, or anti-Polish, or anti-Italian, or contemptuous of "the lower classes." The sorts of crude slur that were routine then have very largely disappeared from accepted usage, but many of the old prejudices persist in subtler forms, and not a few new ones have taken root as well. If they are not always visible or audible in polite company, they nevertheless can have devastating effects. Experiments in which large numbers of identical resumes are sent out, for example, indicate that a person with an African American-sounding name is far less likely to be granted an interview than is a person with a white American-sounding name and exactly the same credentials.[1] Similarly, in France someone with a Muslim-sounding name is vastly less likely to be considered for a job than someone with a traditional French name.[2] Similar studies have found that a woman is far less likely to be considered for a science-related position at Yale University than is a man with identical credentials.[3]

1 See, for example, Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination," NBER Working Paper No. 9873, July 2003. Bertrand and Mullainathan found that white job applicants are 50 percent more likely to receive an interview than African American ones.

2 See Claire L. Adida, David D. Laitin, and Marie-Anne Valfort, "Identifying Barriers to Muslim Integration in France," *PNAS* vol. 107, no. 52, 28 December 2010. Laitin et al. found that in France a Muslim candidate is two and a half times less likely to be interviewed than a Christian one.

3 See Corinne A. Moss-Racusin et al., "Science Faculty's Subtle Biases Favor Male Students," *PNAS* vol. 109, no. 41, 9 October 2012. Moss-Racusin et al. also found that women were offered lower starting salaries than men with the same credentials.

Often, of course, prejudices are held silently—and often they are held in our subconscious rather than our conscious mind. Often, too, a style that is considerate to others is not simply a matter of avoiding prejudiced words. It is always good to think about the first or third person pronouns one is using, and who they may include or exclude. In some cases it may be better to repeat a noun than to replace it with a pronoun. Consider these examples in which writers discuss a group they do not belong to, but which members of the audience they are addressing may well be a part of:

worth checking The twentieth century brought a revolution in the roles that women play in North American society; in 1900 they still were not allowed to vote in any North American jurisdiction.

[If the writer is male and addressing an audience of both women and men, it is more inclusive to avoid using the third person "they."]

revised The twentieth century brought a revolution in the roles that women play in North American society; in 1900 women still were not allowed to vote in any North American jurisdiction.

or The twentieth century brought a revolution in gender roles in North American society; in 1900 women still were not allowed to vote in any North American jurisdiction.

worth checking In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries several rulings by the Supreme

Court altered the landscape considerably where Canada's Aboriginal peoples are concerned. They now have much greater leverage when it comes to natural resource issues than they did before the Court's Delgamuukw and Tsilhqot'in decisions.

[If the writer is not Aboriginal and is addressing an Aboriginal audience or an audience that could include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, it is more inclusive to avoid using the third-person "they" and "them."]

revised In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries several rulings by the Supreme Court altered the landscape considerably where Canada's Aboriginal peoples are concerned. First Peoples now have much greater leverage when it comes to natural resource issues than was the case before the Court's Delgamuukw and Tsilhqot'in decisions.

worth checking I would like to conclude my remarks with a prayer that has meant a great deal to me. We all know how God can bring light into our lives; certainly He has done so for me.

[This is appropriate if the speaker is addressing a crowd that she knows is entirely made up of fellow believers—but inappropriate if the speaker is addressing a mixed crowd of believers, agnostics, and atheists.]

revised I would like to conclude my remarks with a prayer that has meant a great deal to me.

Many of you may have experienced the feeling of God bringing light into your life; certainly He has done that for me.

[This is appropriate if the speaker is addressing a mixed crowd of believers, agnostics, and atheists.]

A related issue often arises in writing dealing with political and cultural issues. It is all too easy to slip into language that presumes the norm in one's own area to be the norm throughout the entire country, or the norm in one's own society to be the norm worldwide. In such situations it is worth taking the time to find wording that is more precise.

worth checking In the world we live in today, most people learn to drive before they reach their late twenties.

[This is no doubt true in North America and much of Europe—but it is certainly not true of "most people" in India, or Nigeria, or Papua New Guinea. Overall, far fewer than half the world's population learn to drive at any age.]

revised In the United States and Canada today, most people learn to drive before they reach their late twenties.

Another unconsciously biased habit to avoid is the use of unnecessary racial or religious identifiers. Mentioning a person's gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation in connection with occupation is a common habit, but one that reinforces stereotypes as to what sort of person one would naturally expect to be a lawyer or a doctor or a nurse. Unless

race or gender or religion is in some way relevant to the conversation, it is inappropriate to refer to someone as a male nurse, or a Jewish doctor, or a Native lawyer. Here's an example from the 17 October 2012 issue of *The Globe and Mail*: "A female Canadian border guard was shot at one of the country's busiest crossings Tuesday." Is there any reason to foreground the sex of the border guard in this way? If the guard had been a man, the writer would surely not have written "A male Canadian border guard was…." Whereas using gender-neutral terms helps to reinforce our acceptance of the idea that occupations are not inherently male or female, terms such as "female border guard" (or "female electrician," or "male nurse," or "woman doctor") work in the opposite direction, reinforcing old stereotypes.

Similarly, the more we foreground a person's race when it is *not* a characteristic relevant to the discussion, the more we encourage people to emphasize race rather than focusing on other human attributes.

worth checking I was given a ticket for speeding last week; a Black police officer pulled me over just after I'd crossed the Port Mann bridge. So I had to pay the bridge toll and an eighty dollar fine!

revised I was given a ticket for speeding last week; a police officer pulled me over just after I'd crossed the Port Mann bridge. So I had to pay the bridge toll and an eighty dollar fine!

worth checking I've heard that Professor Andover's course in Canadian literature is very interesting.

> She's of Asian background from the look of her; she just joined the department this year. Apparently she's an expert on Leonard Cohen and the connections between literature and music.

[It may not be immediately apparent to some readers that there is anything odd or problematic about this example. Substitute "She's white—of Caucasian racial background from the look of her" and the point may become more clear; the racial or cultural background of Professor Andover is not relevant here.]

revised I've heard that Professor Andover's course in Canadian literature is very interesting. She just joined the department this year; apparently she's an expert on Leonard Cohen and the connections between literature and music.

It's one thing to acknowledge this principle; it's quite another to put it into practice, since in many cases doing so goes against the habits of a lifetime. For most North Americans, the only thing that might be thought of as objectionable in the following passage from David Sedaris's highly amusing autobiographical essay "Guy Walks into a Bar Car" is the loud man's off-color joke:

> When a couple of seats opened up, Johnny and I took them. Across the narrow carriage, a black man with a bushy mustache pounded on the Formica tabletop. "So a nun goes into town," he said, "and sees a sign reading, 'Quickies—Twenty-five Dollars.' Not sure what it means, she walks back to

> the convent and pulls aside the mother superior. 'Excuse me,' she asks, 'but what's a quickie?
>
> "And the old lady goes, 'Twenty-five dollars. Just like in town.'"
>
> As the car filled with laughter, Johnny lit a fresh cigarette. "Some comedian," he said.

Sedaris's account of the train journey unfolds over several pages. The man with the mustache continues to tell crude jokes—and Sedaris continues to identify him not as as *the man with the bushy mustache* or *the loud man*—but as *the black man*—even as other (presumably white) people are identified in other ways:

> "All right," called the black man on the other side of the carriage. "I've got another one." … A red-nosed woman in a decorative sweatshirt started to talk, but the black fellow told her that he wasn't done yet … As the black man settled down,…
>
> "Here's a clean one," the black man said….

But why should it matter, you may ask. Maybe his blackness is what the writer has noticed first about the man. Isn't that harmless enough? The short answer is no. If writers identify people first and foremost by their race and not by other, more individualized characteristics, they subtly color perceptions—both their readers' and their own. And that is of course particularly harmful when the characterization is a negative one. Sedaris is a wonderful writer, but in this instance he would have been a better writer had he referred repeatedly to *the mustachioed man* (or *the loudmouth*) and not to *the black man*. If North American history included

the mass enslavement of mustachioed men or loudmouthed men, the point might be argued rather differently. But it doesn't.

Our internalized prejudices can also cause us, when we describe individuals, to emphasize the characteristics that reinforce those prejudices while deemphasizing characteristics that don't match our expectations. Consider the following descriptions of political candidates of different genders who have essentially the same backgrounds:

- Carla Jenkins, a lawyer and a school board trustee, is also the mother of three lovely daughters.
- George Kaplan, a lawyer and a school board trustee, has a long record of public service in the region.
- George Kaplan, a lawyer and a school board trustee, is also the father of three lovely daughters.
- Carla Jenkins, a lawyer and a school board trustee, has a long record of public service in the region.

The impression left in many minds by such phrasings is that the person described as having a long record of public service is well suited to public office, while the person whose parenting is emphasized may be better suited to staying at home. Some may feel that parenthood is relevant in such cases; if you do, be sure to mention it for everyone, not just for women. The guideline here is that, when describing a person, you should mention only the qualities you feel are relevant. And be sure to describe everyone you discuss in the same context with the same lens: if you feel it necessary to refer to relationship status or physical appearance, do so

for everyone; if you mention degree qualifications or career achievements, do so for everyone.

Nor is it generally appropriate to stereotype members of particular groups even in ways that one considers positive; by doing so one may fail to give credit for individual achievement, while leaving the harmful impression that the given group possesses innate qualities that are universal among members of the group.

needs checking Of course she gets straight As in all her subjects; she's from Hong Kong.

revised It's no wonder she gets straight As in all her subjects; her parents have given her a great deal of encouragement, and she works very hard.

It's clear, then, that we should not overemphasize a person's race, gender, or membership in any other group in ways that reinforce stereotypes about that group. But what about situations where a person's membership in a given group contradicts common stereotypes? Certainly, you would not want to call attention to the fact that a certain police officer is black or a certain pastor is bisexual every time you mentioned that person. But it is also important to keep in mind that "police officer" and "pastor" are two of many descriptors that, for most people, carry with them a harmful set of default assumptions—in these cases, that, unless we are told otherwise, any given police officer or minister is a white, heterosexual man. Even those of us who try to avoid being prejudiced tend to have internalized assumptions like these. If we try to ignore them by pretending that race, gender,

and other differences do not exist, we risk perpetuating the "default" status of whiteness, maleness, and so on.

Some people may pride themselves on being "colorblind" when it comes to race, for example, or on thinking that gay and heterosexual people are "just the same." But just as it is a worthy goal not to overemphasize differences, it is important not to overlook them entirely, as though the vast differences between the life experiences of human beings were insignificant or embarrassing. Acknowledging difference is important, in large part, because many differences come with relative degrees of privilege and prejudice attached, and ignoring difference is often tantamount to ignoring discrimination. But recognizing difference is also important simply because human beings are not all the same, and all experiences ought to be acknowledged—not just the experiences of the "default" race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, size, and so on. Audre Lorde, an important Black lesbian feminist theorist of the twentieth century, suggested that the acknowledgment and even celebration of difference was central to combatting prejudice:

> [W]e have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals….
>
> Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those

> differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences.[1] …

Some of us might find it more comfortable to avoid talking and writing about difference entirely, but that is not something we can afford to do. *How* exactly we can best talk about specific differences is one of the major questions addressed in the rest of this book.

1 "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider*, 1984.