

How to Handle Personal Pronouns So You Don't Appear Sexist or Ignorant!

By Michael J. Dowling

What's a fellow...er, person...to do? The English language has become unduly cumbersome when it comes to sex.

Two score years ago life was much simpler. If one wanted to write a sentence that referred to both men and women, a masculine pronoun would suffice. For example, "Everyone has *his* bad days" was perfectly acceptable.

But times have changed.

Today many consider it inappropriate to use a masculine pronoun when referring to both men and women. Some even take offense. So, how are we to write, "Everyone has his bad days"?

"Everyone has *his or her* bad days" solves the sexist problem, but the cumbersome style detracts from the flow.

"Everyone has *his/er* bad days" is even less desirable. It's both cumbersome *and* gimmicky.

Well, then, what's the solution?

One approach that's becoming increasingly popular is to replace the gender-specific singular pronoun – *his* – with a plural pronoun that isn't gender-specific, such as *their*. Taking this tact, we'd change "Everyone has *his* bad days" to "Everyone has *their* bad days."

The problem with this solution is that most American English dictionaries and style manuals consider the pronouns *everyone* and *everybody* to be singular. **It's grammatically incorrect for a plural pronoun (*their*) to refer to a singular antecedent (*everyone*).**

Languages evolve over time, and British English now considers the pronouns *everyone* and *everybody* to be either singular or plural. So if you're criticized for using this solution, tell your critics that you're using British English. (Unfortunately, this argument won't work with the pronouns *anyone* and *anybody*. They're always considered singular, even by the British.)

One universally acceptable solution is to recast the entire sentence in the plural. For example, you could change "Everyone has his bad days" to "*All* have *their* bad days." And if you're talking about an identifiable group of people (e.g., writers), you can say, "All *writers* have *their* bad days."

A second alternative, when the context allows for informality, is to recast the sentence in the first-person plural. Using this approach, we would rewrite “Everyone has his bad days” as “*We* all have *our* bad days.”

A third approach is to eliminate the gender-specific pronoun altogether. “Everyone has *his* bad days” becomes simply, “Everyone has bad days.” Not quite as strong, but it gets you out of the clutches of the politically correct police.

Now you remember why you hated high school English!

Writing personal pronouns in a manner that is both politically and grammatically correct requires thought and creativity. As politicians say *after* they get elected, “There’s no simple, one-size-fits-all solution.”

But I hope this article at least has given every one of my readers some ideas he or she can use so s/he will have fewer bad days with their writing!

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