

SEX AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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 consider it offensive.

Yes, times change rapidly, but languages may change more gradually. And the English language in its current state of evolution handles gender-specific pronouns awkwardly.

So, what are we to do with "Everyone has his bad days"?

We can make this sentence more culturally acceptable by writing, "Everyone has *his or her* bad days." But although that solves one problem, it creates another: the cumbersome style now detracts from the flow of the text.

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

An increasingly popular solution is to substitute a *plural* pronoun for the gender specific *singular* pronoun. In our case we would say, "Everyone has *their* bad days." But *The Chicago Manual of Style* and most other writing guides frown upon such wording, because it's grammatically incorrect for a plural pronoun (their) to refer to a singular noun or pronoun (everyone).

One acceptable solution is to eliminate the gender specific pronoun. For example, we could write, "Everyone has bad days." In our case this new phrasing may lack some of the verve of the original, but it's culturally more acceptable.

Another solution is to recast the sentence in the plural: "*All* have *their* bad days." Adding a noun, or substituting a noun for the pronoun, may further improve readability. For example, if the text is talking about writers, we could say, "All *writers* have their bad days."

Unfortunately, there's no one neat and tidy solution to the gender pronoun problem. These days writing English that is both culturally and grammatically acceptable may require creativity. But at least I hope this brief article will give the reader some ideas he or she can use so s/he will have fewer bad days with his or her writing!

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