Do the NCTE Guidelines on Non-Sexist

Lance Alter

Do the NCTE Guidelines serve a positive purpose? I think not. At best, they are mischievous and unnecessary. At worst, they introduce ideology and partisan activism into the language arts. The authors of the Guidelines are creating problems which only exist in the minds of certain ideologues. They emphasize social policy rather than standards of quality in language and literature.

If the Guidelines were not intended to be taken seriously, I could say to the authors, “At first, I thought that you might actually be serious, but then it hit me—this is a satire, a farce, a put-on! Obviously, it cannot be intended as a serious statement. I must say that the satire is rather broad, none too subtle!” Indeed, if one wished to satirize the point of view represented by the Guidelines, it would only be necessary to quote some of the suggestions made in the Guidelines in order to indicate to most readers the problems inherent in them.

Really! To say that “man,” as in “mankind,” refers only to males is a bit absurd. Is there anyone, other than, perhaps, a member of the NCTE committee, who doesn’t know that “mankind” refers to both male and female? As a matter of fact, people have always known this and have never intended or interpreted it to be sexist until the recent attempts by the NCTE to ideologize the language.

To suggest that by saying something like “The judge . . . he,” we are conditioning ourselves against the idea of a female judge is absolute nonsense. Those of us who are “guilty” of such formulations are well aware that both men and women serve as judges, and we do not exclude women from the judiciary in either our thoughts or our actions when we use the language in the traditional manner.

When I say “Each student should bring his book to class,” it is obvious both to my students and to me that I am talking about the girls as well as the boys. I have never had this misunderstood by any of my students. In bemoaning the lack of a generic singular common-sex pronoun, the Guidelines are quite willing to give the seal of approval to improper usage. Thus, “Anyone who wants to go to the game should bring their money tomorrow.” This is justified by taking the position that in most cases plural pronouns have become acceptable substitutes for the masculine singular in referring to indefinite pronouns. I would hope that this is not so. Using “their” to refer to “anyone” will seem rather peculiar to large numbers of outstanding writers.

The committee suggests saying “the best man or woman for the job” instead of “the best man.” This just makes the language unnecessarily awkward and wordy and is simply not necessary. Everyone knows (notice that “everyone” still requires a singular verb for agreement) that the best man for the job might possibly be a woman.

In the introduction to the Guidelines it is stated that “. . . as the language is liberated from sexist usages and assumptions, women and men will begin to share more equal, active, caring roles.” I would seriously doubt that the changes suggested by NCTE would accomplish this. Does the use of the phrase, “old wives’ tale,” really offend women or make them feel “trivialized” or “patronized”? Would the elimination of such phrases contribute to greater equality, or, more likely, would it simply take away from the color and variety of the language? The Guidelines even go so far as to suggest that it is bad to say “Dr. and Mrs. James O’Conner.” Instead, we should say “James and Marilyn O’Conner.” I can hardly wait for some of our egocentric Ph.D.’s, both male and female, to hear about this!

The authors of the Guidelines shouldn’t get all steamed up about sex-role stereotyping. The fact is that if a father wants to bake cookies and a mother wants to work on the car engine, no one is going to prevent them from doing so. However, the fact remains that most women will probably prefer certain occupations and pastimes over other ones, not because of discrimination or stereotyping, but because of personal preference. More often than not, it would be more logical to ask your mother to bring cookies than to ask your parents.

Dr. Rafferty tells us that after all the clamoring to open up shop classes to girls and sewing classes to boys, very few are availing themselves of the opportunity. Not only is this no great surprise to most people, it is not considered deplorable either. A sense of perspective is called for. I am not at all offended by the many feminine references in the

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Use of Language Serve a Positive Purpose?

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ONE MAN IN TWO IS A WOMAN

If you took offense, assuming as you read "one man in two is a woman," that you were reading a slur against the virility of men, then you have just fallen into one of the semantic chuck-holes that traps us all and interferes with precise communication. Actually, if we take the time to be reasonable about it, we can figure out that if man means humanity as a whole, as our English teachers taught us, then it becomes clear that at least one man in two is a woman and that no assault on masculine honor was intended. However, the fact that you were tripped up indicates that we seriously need to strive to discard such clumsy baggage as this form of man from our discourse.

Regard, in this bicentennial year, the sacred text, "all men are created equal." Recall that a war and the passage of 100 years eventually established that "all men" legally meant all males. Reflect that a total of 150 years were required to validate that women too had "certain inalienable rights."

When I hear that twentieth century man can control his environment, I would like to rise and take a bow. Except that I wonder, as a woman, if that includes me. For the next 1500 words I shall assume that it means both men and women, and I shall advance the proposition that control over the part of our environment that involves semantic clarification and language planning is available to us and must be self-consciously, deliberately promoted as the NCTE Guidelines suggest. For those who object to linguistic interference as mind control, some persuasion is in order. For those who would argue that language is an inviolable cultural artifact, is the sacred vessel of human thought which must not be jostled by social technicians, rebuttals are here offered.

First, and most obviously, there is no way that English teachers can keep their hands off language. The mandate of our profession is to wade in, hip deep, and do whatever we can to order the flood of student words. We are perpetually working to channel the torrent of English as it is spoken and written in the classroom. Because we cannot avoid affecting the flow, we must be sure that how we do it is humane. It must be humane for the individual students within our personal reach, and it must also be humane in the larger social and historical context. Since we are teaching people how to write, let it be for the greatest good for the greatest number.

Secondly, let us agree with the current linguists who say that languages primarily reflect social and cultural conditions rather than create socio-cultural values and orientations. If it does not commensurately reflect the new values and orientations that are bubbling up everywhere around us, then it is appropriate to wonder whether or not some artificial restrictions are being imposed on language. Consider the cumulative effect of a million English teachers insisting ceaselessly on the generic he and marking all student papers wrong unless they include the construction "everyone . . . he"—wrong in spite of the fact that most people seem to say "everyone . . . they," and in spite of the fact that maybe "everyone . . . it" is the best logical choice, considering that the subject and pronoun ought to agree in number and in gender.

Inasmuch as this matter is a particularly important point and one at which some traditionalists may dig in their heels, close reasoning is called for. "Most of us," like two letter-writers in a recent English Journal, "want to merge skills learning with the learning that reflects a concern for the person, the society, and the human condition." However, the insistence in English upon the use of the generic he may be especially damaging to our stated concerns because of the nature of the English language itself.


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English language. Colleges, ships, cities, and hurricanes are referred to in feminine terms. Truth is feminine, and Beauty is personified as a female. Incredibly, this actually bothers a few people!

The authors think it would be better to say “the women talked” rather than “the women chattered.” Big deal! If women do “chatter,” then it is accurate. If they do not, then that will become obvious, and everyone can just laugh at or dismiss the incorrect characterization. Indeed, I would suggest a little more sense of humor and perspective. Making a big deal out of trivia is likely to intensify it. For example, if members of a particular ethnic group laugh and don’t get upset by jokes about their group, they will appear much more able and self-confident than they will if they get all uptight and insecure about it.

Those of us who oppose the Guidelines enjoy taking the opportunity to suggest other changes to the committee. By pretending that random syllables in various words have sexist meanings and should be changed, we are able to frustrate the reformers with lists of words such as: mandate, manifest, boycott, manufacture, and amen! The new-language creators will indignantly reply that these words do not have the sexist connotations that they are concerned about. Perhaps that is the point that must be considered. “Mankind” does not have sexist connotations for most people, and neither does the use of that masculine singular pronoun in an obviously generic reference.

I resent very much the ideologization of the language arts. Many of the Guidelines show much more concern for the political and social biases of the committee than for the maintenance of standards in language instruction. In these times of declining SAT scores and mediocre reading and writing performances by our students, don’t we have matters more important than sexist language to consider? If the committee members find traditional usage to be sexist, then that is their particular hang-up. They should not try to impose their social outlook on those of us who do not share their enthusiasms.

Indeed, the committee would, in effect, blacklist those authors who do not adhere to its suggestions for non-sexist language. Persons choosing items for book lists are asked to choose books that "emphasize the equality of men and women and show them in nontraditional as well as traditional roles." Thus, books are to be chosen not for their literary merit nor for their potential for providing the many kinds of experiences for the reader that good writing can provide. They are to be chosen for their propaganda value in getting across to students the ideological views of the NCTE.

Quoting the Guidelines: "Fiction and poetry units should include materials by and about both men and women." I would suggest that fiction and poetry units should contain materials having literary merit, regardless of whom the authors are or what the subject matter might be.

Again the Guidelines: "A unit on classics should be accompanied by questions that promote discussion of the treatment of women and why their image differs from that of men." I would suggest that a unit on the classics should be accompanied by questions that are relevant to the nature and meaning of the work. The classics should not be used to promote the NCTE’s, or anybody else’s, particular philosophies. Would the committee appreciate it if I suggested accompanying a unit on the classics with questions designed to promote discussion of the advantages of the free market? After all, I feel as strongly about the merits of the free market as the committee does about the issue of non-sexist language.

I imagine that my position on this issue will cause some “liberals” to question my social awareness or sensitivity. This often happens to conservatives when they dare to oppose any proposal that has humanitarian pretensions. It matters not whether the proposal is lousy nor whether the conservative could suggest a more practical and humane proposal. He (notice the use of the masculine singular pronoun) is likely to be considered uncaring and cruel even if he is the most compassionate of men. For the record, I am in favor of equal opportunities for all people; however, I would venture that the lack of equal treatment in our society has much more to do with individual morality and integrity than with an individual’s use of the masculine singular pronoun.

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In English, gender and sex are almost always identical; it is less true in other European languages. For example, in German, a girl—das Madchen—whose sex is unquestionably female, is identified by a noun with a neuter article and is referred to by a neuter pronoun; in French, a pen—la plume—which is certainly sexless, is identified by a noun that has a feminine article and is referred to by a feminine pronoun. The probable result is that speakers of German and French may not have the same sense that gender and sex are coextensive as speakers of English seem to have.

Thirdly, few would disagree that the most desirable fountains for social change are the hearts and minds of humankind. But next best, and a powerful force for good, can be official action. For instance, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the subsequent Executive Orders for affirmative action brought about changes that were overdue. In the case of language planning, the NCTE offers Guidelines rather than legislation. Ours is a statement of policy rather than an edict, a gentle reminder that adjustments are due.

Fourthly, language planning need not be seen as repressive interference in the expressions of the human soul. Language planning can be seen as a high order of human activity, entirely consistent with other social efforts such as urban planning, and health-care planning, and pension plans, for relieving the harsh vicissitudes of nature. We humans need not be mindlessly subject to spontaneous language acts after we have recognized that some are not language acts we wish to foster. Those of us whose work is in language and who have had our consciousness raised to the point where we can see the befuddling ways in which some verbal expressions inhibit and force men and women to behave, need not accept undesirable language products as being inevitable. Being rational, we can bring reason to the formulation of goals and we can plan how we want to bring those desired goals into reality.

Fifthly, as English teachers we cannot easily discard the earlier linguistic theory that described human beings as inhabitants of the world of their words. Although that conception of language is not currently popular among linguists, our own daily experiences with students shows us that youngsters, at least, do seem to be imprisoned by the limitations of their language. Whatever vocabulary and forms of discourse they have certainly seem to set the perimeters of the world that they can describe to other people. For easy entry into the new world being born right now, both students and their teachers will need new ways with words.

The NCTE has long been an agency for raising consciousness in public affairs and in semantics. We look to the English Journal to provide factual information and normative leadership. The Journal is expected to record articles on “how we do it” and on “how we ought to do it” in English education. In its Guidelines to avoid sex bias, the NCTE is only continuing to do what it has done in the past and what it ought to be doing.

Four of the seven pages in the Guidelines are given over to non-sexist rhetoric for the classroom and for NCTE publications. The last three pages focus on the matter of eliminating sexism from booklists and teaching units. More could have been included. For starters, I propose that we ask our students and ourselves:

1. Can women and girls achieve the highly valued vicarious experience of life from reading Oedipus Rex, King Lear, Moby Dick, or Red Badge of Courage if women never enter the author’s world? By what means can women and girls be enabled to identify more thoroughly with the giant literary figures who are, in large number, masculine?

2. Why are there so relatively few women artists of any kind? How is it that of those women who achieve public acclaim for their art, a large percentage are literary artists? What do biographies of outstanding women reveal about the lives of women in general and of exceptional women?

3. Of any given work of literary art, we need to ask whether or not it gives a fair similitude of men’s and women’s lives as they are, and as they might better be.

4. It has long been assumed that girls could read boys’ books as well as girls’ books but that boys couldn’t read books by women writers. That assumption should be reexamined today. If their education is to help boys move easily into a new world in which the old rigid dimorphisms give way to a greater androgyne, how can boys’ repertoire of human responses be expanded through literature? While we have been busy encouraging girls to be more assertive, should we not likewise encourage boys to be more reflective in order to mitigate the long-term accumulation of socially conditioned, stereotypical behaviors?

The final lines of the NCTE Guidelines point out the possibilities. “The very newness of these changes in our language offers English teachers a unique opportunity. Under their guidance, eliminating sexism can bring a new vitality to the English language.”

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