

PERFECT FORM: A REVIEW OF *GUIDELINES FOR BIAS-FREE WRITING*

P. J. O'Rourke
The Atlantic Monthly

By Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-Free Language of the Association of American University Presses. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995, \$5.95 (paperback).

The book arrived with an I.U. press release stating that, I quote, *Anyone who spends even a few minutes with the book will be a better writer*. Well, I spent a few minutes with the book, and I feel a spate of better writing coming on.

The pharisaical, malefic, and incogitant *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* is a product of the pointy-headed wowers at the Association of American University Presses who established a Task Force on Bias-Free Language filled with cranks, pokenoses, blowhards, four-flushers, and pettifogs. This foolish and contemptible product of years wasted in mining the shafts of indignation has been published by the cow-besieged, basketball-sotted sleep-away camp for hick bourgeois offspring, Indiana University, under the aegis of its University Press, a traditional dumping ground for academic deadwood so bereft of talent, intelligence, and endeavor as to be useless even in the dull precincts of midwestern state college classrooms.

But perhaps I'm biased. What, after all, is wrong with a project of this ilk? Academic language is supposed to be exact and neutral, a sort of mathematics of ideas, with information recorded in a complete and explicit manner, the record formulated into theories, and attempts made to prove those formulae valid or not. The preface to *Guidelines* says, "Our aim is simply to encourage sensitivity to usages that may be imprecise, misleading, and needlessly offensive." And few scholars would care to have their usages so viewed, myself excluded.

The principal author of the text, Ms. Schwartz—(I apologize. In the first chapter of *Guidelines*, titled "Gender," it says, in Section 1.41, lines 4-5: "Scholars normally refer to individuals solely by their full or their last names, omitting courtesy titles.")

The principal author of the text, Schwartz—(No, I'm afraid that won't do. Vide Section 1.41, lines 23-25: "Because African American women have had to

AUTHOR'S NOTE: P. J. O'Rourke writes for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Weekly Standard*, and other publications. This review is adapted from his recent book *The CEO of the Sofa* (New York Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001).

Please address all correspondence to c/o *The Atlantic Monthly*, 77 North Washington Street, Boston, MA 02114. Email: pjorourke@theatlantic.com.

struggle for the use of traditional titles, some prefer *Mrs.* and *Miss*,” and it would be biased to assume that Schwartz is a white name.)

Mrs. or Miss Marilyn Schwartz—(Gee, I’m sorry. Section 1.41, lines 1-2: “Most guidelines for nonsexist usage urge writers to avoid gratuitous references to the marital status of women.”)

Anyway, as I was saying, Ms. Schwartz—(Excuse me. Lines 7-9: “Ms. may seem anachronistic or ironic if used for a woman who lived prior to the second U.S. feminist movement of the 1960s,” and the head of the Task Force on Bias-Free Language may be, for all I know, old as the hills.)

So, Marilyn—(Oops. Section 1.42, lines 1-3: “Careful writers normally avoid referring to a woman by her first name alone because of the trivializing or condescending effect.”)

And *that’s* what’s wrong with a project of this ilk.

Nonetheless, the principal author—What’s-her-face—has crafted a smooth, good-tempered, even ingratiating tract. The more ridiculous neologisms and euphemistic expressions are shunned. Thieves are not “differently ethiced,” *women* isn’t spelled with any Y’s, and men aren’t “ovum-deprived reproductory aids—optional equipment only.”

A tone of mollifying suggestion is used: “The following recommendations are not intended as prescriptive—” (Though in a project this bossy it is impossible for the imperative mood to completely disappear: “Writers must resort to gender-neutral alternatives where the common gender form has become strongly marked as masculine.” Therefore, if the fire department’s standards of strength and fitness are changed to allow sexual parity in hiring, I shall be careful to say that the person who was too weak and small to carry me down the ladder was a *firefighter*, not a *fireman*.)

And pains are taken to extend linguistic sensitivity beyond the realms of the fashionably oppressed to Christians (“Terms may be pejorative rather than descriptive in some contexts—*born again*, *cult*, *evangelical*, *fundamentalist*, *sect*”), teenagers and adolescents (“these terms may carry unwanted connotations because of their frequent occurrence in phrases referring to social and behavioral problems”), and even Republicans (“some married women . . . deplore *Ms.* because of its feminist connotations”).

Levity is attempted. Once. This unattributed example of textbook prose is given to show just how funny a lack of feminism can be: “Man, like other mammals, breast-feeds his young.”

A mea culpa turn is performed at the end of the preface: “Finally, we realize—lest there be any misunderstanding about this—that there is no such thing as truly bias-free language and that our advice is inevitably shaped by our own point of view—that of white, North American (specifically U.S.), feminist publishing professionals.”

And there is even an endearing little lapse on page 36: “A judicious use of ellipses or bracketed interpolations may enable the author to *skirt the problem*” [italics, let this interpolation note, are my own].

PERFECT FORM

Why then, do the laudable goals claimed and the reasonable tone taken in *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* provoke an as laudable fury and a completely reasonable loathing in this reader? First there is the overweening vanity of twenty-one obscure and unrenowned members of the Task Force on Bias-Free Language presuming to tell whole universities full of learned people what is and what is not an “unwarranted bias.” No doubt the task force went on to use feminist theory to map the genes in human DNA.

Then there is *petitio principii*, begging the question, the logical fallacy of assuming as true that which is to be proven. This book, a purported device to assist in truth finding, instead announces what truths are to be found: “Sensitive writers seek to avoid terms and statements implying or assuming that heterosexuality is the norm for sexual attraction.” Which is why the earth is populated by only a few dozen people, all wearing Mardi Gras costumes.

Fallacious disregard for the truth is habitual in *Guidelines*. We are told that “sexist characterizations of animal traits and behaviors are inappropriate” (thereby depriving high school biology students of a classroom giggle over the praying mantis eating her mate after coitus). We are warned against considering animals in “gender-stereotyped human terms” and are given, as an admonitory example, the sentence “A stallion guards his brood of mares,” although the stallion will do it no matter how many task forces are appointed by the Association of American University Presses. We hear that it is permitted to use “traditional technical terms, such as *feminine rhyme*” but are told to “avoid introducing gender stereotypes—e.g., ‘weak’ rhymes.” But a feminine rhyme, with its extra unaccented syllable, is, in fact, feeble. Note the effect on this children’s classic by Clement Clarke Moore:

‘Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the housing
Not a creature was stirring—not even a mousing.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be thereing.

We are scolded for using “illegal alien” when “undocumented resident or undocumented worker is generally preferred as less pejorative.” What, they *aren’t* illegal? Try hiring one if you’ve been nominated as Secretary of Labor. And *Guidelines* goes so far as to urge utter dishonesty upon translators, saying they should make up their own sanctimonious minds about “Whether gender-biased characteristics of the original warrant replication in English.”

When the book is not lying or creating reasons to do so, it is engaging in the most tiresome sort of feminist scholasticism. Thirteen pages are devoted to wrestling with alternatives to the generic “he.” A central thesis of *Guidelines* is thereby nearly disproven. If they require thirteen pages to discuss a pronoun, maybe women *are* inferior. (Even Bill Clinton—beloved of feminists—didn’t need that much space to parse “is.”)

Why doesn’t the task force just combine “she” and “it” and pronounce the thing accordingly. This would be no worse than the rest of the violence the book does to the language. Use of the obnoxious singular “they” is extolled. Shakespeare is cited by way of justification, and let me cite *Taming of the Shrew* as

grounds for my critique. Dwarfism is described as a medical condition “resulting in severe short stature.” Gosh, that was a strict midget. And the word “man,” meaning humanity, is to be discarded, replaced by “people” or “person.” *What a piece of work is person!*

No, not even the members of the Task Force on Bias-Free Language are this tin-eared. They admit, “these terms cannot always substitute for generic man” and suggest that “other revisions may be preferable.” For instance, the sentence can be recast so that the first person plural is used: *What a piece of work we are!*

Much of *Guidelines* is simply mealy-mouthed, touting the Mrs. Grundyisms (she lived before the second U.S. feminist movement) that pompous nonentities have always favored: “*congenital disability . . . is preferable to birth defect*” and “manifestations of epilepsy are termed *seizures*, not *fits*.” But on some pages pretension progresses to delusion: for example, “terms such as *mentally deranged, mentally unbalanced, mentally diseased, insane, deviant, demented, and crazy* are not appropriate.” Which statement is—how else to put it?—mentally deranged, mentally unbalanced, mentally diseased, insane, deviant, demented, and crazy.

The members of the Task Force on Bias-Free Language should be exiled to former Yugoslavia and made to teach bias-free Serbo-Croatian to Serbs and Croats for the rest of their natural lives—that is to say, until their pupils tear them limb from limb. But this is just for the book’s minor sins. Bad as *Guidelines* is so far, it gets worse.

The text assaults free will: “Most people do not consider their sexuality a matter of choice.” Oh-oh. Left my zipper down and there goes Mr. Happy. Who knows what he’ll do? Better lock up your daughters. Also, of course, your sons. And since “Writers are enjoined to avoid gratuitous references to age,” better lock up Granny, too.

The authors deprecate commonsense standards of good: “Designating countries as *undeveloped* or *underdeveloped* implies an evolutionary hierarchy of nations based on wealth, type of economy, and degree of industrialization.” Of course it does, you feeble-minded idiots.

“Labels such as *feeble-minded, idiot, imbecile, mentally defective, mentally deficient, moron, and retard* are considered offensive.” I mean, you possessors of “a condition in which a person has significantly below-average general intellectual functioning.”

Morals are attacked. We are told that “many stereotypical terms that are still found in writing about American Indians” are “highly offensive.” One of them being “*massacre* (to refer to a successful American Indian raid or battle victory against white colonizers and invaders).” Ugh, Chief. Log cabins all burn. Heap many scalps. And UN High Commissioner for Refugees got-em all women and children.

And even the idea of normal is condemned: “The term *normal* may legitimately refer to a statistical norm for human ability (normal vision is 20/20) but should usually be avoided in other contexts as . . . invidious.”

Thus deprived of all tools of independent judgment and means of private action, the gender-neutral, age-nonspecific, amoral, abnormal *person* is rendered

PERFECT FORM

helpless. Or, as *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* puts it, “The term *able-bodied* obscures [a] continuum of ability and may perpetuate an invidious distinction between persons so designated and those with disabilities.”

We’re all crippled. And we’re all minorities too, because “A ‘minority’ may be defined not on the basis of population size, color, or ethnicity (e.g., women and people with disabilities are sometimes described as minorities), but in terms of power in a particular society.”

Guidelines then goes about treating these overwhelming minorities with absurd sensitivity. We are warned off “the many common English expressions that originate in a disparaging characterization of a particular group or people;” *Siamese twins*, *get one’s Irish up*, and even to *shanghai* are cited. Nonwhite is “Objectionable in some contexts because it makes white the standard by which individuals are classified.” Far East is “Eurocentric. *East Asia* is now preferred.” The expression ghetto *blaster* for a portable stereo (or, more colloquially, a “boom box”) is offensive as a stereotype [the pun goes unremarked in the text] of “African American culture.” Objection is made to the designation Latin American “because not all persons referred to as Latin American speak a Latin-based language.” We are told that “some long-accepted common names for botanical species—Digger Pine (from a derogatory name for California native people who used the nuts from the *Pinus sabiniana*)—are offensive and are now undergoing revision in the scientific community.” Artwork, also, must be carefully reviewed. “Graphic devices and clip art used by production and marketing staff can be generic and misleading . . . a traditional Zuni design gracing chapter openings in a book about the Iroquois; an illustration of a geisha advertising a press’s book on Japan.” Law enforcement, too. The word *mafia* is held to be “Discriminatory against Italian Americans unless used in the correct historical sense; not interchangeable with *organized crime*.” And we mustn’t say anything good about minorities either. “Gratuitous characterizations of individuals, such as *well-dressed*, *intelligent*, *articulate*, and *qualified* . . . may be unacceptably patronizing in some contexts, as are positive stereotypes—the polite, hardworking Japanese person or the silver-tongued Irish person.”

What’s happening here? Is the task force just going to bizarre lengths to avoid hurt feelings? Or is it trying to make those feelings hurt as much as possible? Has the Association of American University Presses crossed the line between petting minorities and giving them—as it were—a Dutch rub? We’re all pathetic members of oppressed minority factions, and the whole world—now wildly annoyed by reading *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing*—hates our guts. And everything, everything, right down to grammar itself, is terribly unfair. Oh, what will become of us? Whatever shall we do?

Some enormous power for good is needed. Government will hardly answer, since *Guidelines* has shown us that even such well-meaning political entities as Sweden and Canada are no better than Cambodia or Congo. Perhaps there is a religious solution. But when we encounter the word *heathen* in *Guidelines*, we are told that “uncivilized or irreligious” is a “pejorative connotation.” So God is out. And, anyway, He is notorious for His bias in favor of certain minorities and for the

gross inequities of His creation. Really we have only one place to turn—the Association of American University Presses and, specifically, the members of its Task Force on Bias-Free Language. Who has been more fair than they? Who more sensitive? Who more inclusive? Who more just?

Sure, the task force seems to be nothing but a rat bag of shoddy pedagogues, athletes of the tongue, professional pick-nits filling the stupid hours of their pointless days with nagging the yellow-bellied editors of university presses, which print volume after volume of bound bum-wad fated to sit unread in college library stacks until the sun expires. Yet the task force will bind the wounds of the world. The very Association of American University Presses itself says so in the position statement adopted by the AAUP Board of Directors in November 1992: “Books that are on the cutting edge of scholarship should also be at the forefront in recognizing how language encodes prejudice. They should be agents for change and the redress of past mistakes.”

If the suggestions in *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* are followed diligently by the acknowledged cultural vanguard, everything will change, all ills will be rectified, and redemption will be available to us all.

The Task Force on Bias-Free Language shall be our salvation, truth, and light. If you close your eyes, if you open your heart, if you empty your mind—especially if you empty your mind—you can see the task force members. There they are in a stuffy seminar room in some inconvenient corner of the campus, with unwashed hair, in Kmart blue jeans, batik-print tent dresses, and off-brand running shoes, the synthetic fibers from their fake Aran Islands sweaters pilling at the elbows while they dance in circles around the conference table, shouting affirmations.

“Yes! Tremble at our inclusiveness! Bow down before our sensitivity! Culturalism in all its multiness is ours! No more shall the pejorative go to and fro in the earth! Woe to the invidious! Behold *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing*, ye Eurocentric male-dominated power structure, and despair!”

The nurse (either a man or a woman, since it is no longer proper to use the word as a “gender-marked” term) is coming from the university infirmary with their medications. . . .