

Gender-specific and gender-neutral language trends in the *AP Stylebook* and online written news: A comparative corpus analysis of prescribed vs. actual usage

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Contrary to traditional thought in linguistics and editing, recent corpus studies suggest that historical English usage patterns influenced prescriptive usage manuals' guidelines more than the other way around — that prescriptions followed usage. To explore the modern relationship between English language guides and usage, this study focuses on gender-fair language in the genre of written online news. It compares changes regarding gender-specific and -neutral titles in the Associated Press's stylebooks to actual usage trends as documented by the News on the Web (NOW) corpus. Results from NOW show *-man* title variants as the dominant form in the early 2010s, consistent with AP style at that time. However, many gender-neutral (including *-person*) variants saw rapid uptake in usage in the mid-2010s to become the most frequent forms by 2021, contrasting AP guidelines that only started listing *-person* and other neutral forms as 'acceptable' around 2017 and as the prescribed forms more recently. These results indicate both an increased cultural consciousness for changing gender equity standards in language as well as a willingness of many news writers, editors, and publishers to defer to culturally significant linguistic trends even if authoritative guides do not yet endorse them. This research was published in *English Today* in December 2024.

Keywords

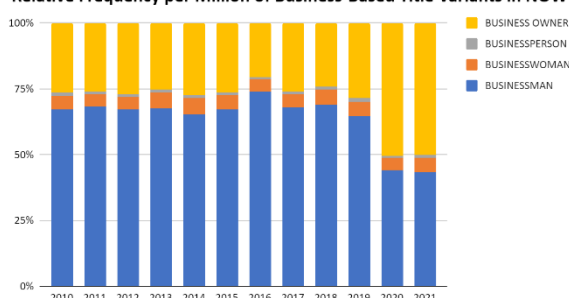
corpus linguistics; gender-fair language; prescriptivism; usage; inclusive language; editing

Example Tables & Figures

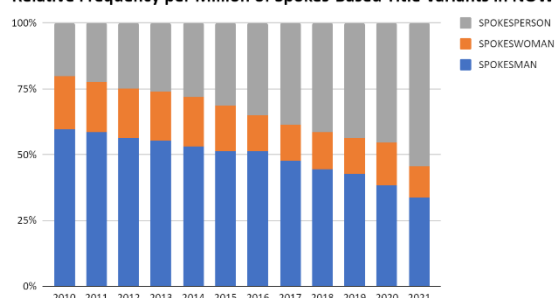
Table 1.1. Entries on *-person*

2011	-persons. Do not use coined words such as <i>chairperson</i> or <i>spokesperson</i> in regular text. Instead, use <i>chairman</i> or <i>spokesman</i> if referring to a man or the office in general. Use <i>chairwoman</i> or <i>spokeswoman</i> if referring to a woman. Or, if applicable, use a neutral word such as <i>leader</i> or <i>representative</i> . Use <i>chairperson</i> or similar coinage only in direct quotations or when it is the formal description for an office.
2013	[No change from 2011 entry]
2017	-person. Acceptable for the formal name of a post or person, or if preferred by an individual: <i>chairperson</i> or <i>spokesperson</i> .
2019	[No change from 2017 entry]
2022	gender-neutral language. In general, use terms such as <i>chair</i> or <i>chairperson</i> , <i>councilperson</i> or <i>council member</i> , and <i>spokesperson</i> unless the <i>-man</i> or <i>-woman</i> terms are specified by an organization. . . . While some <i>-person</i> constructions, such as <i>chairperson</i> and <i>spokesperson</i> , are commonly used, avoid tortured or unfamiliar constructions such as <i>snowperson</i> , <i>baseperson</i> or <i>freshperson</i> . Similarly, don't use <i>siblinghood</i> in place of <i>brotherhood</i> or <i>sisterhood</i> .

Relative Frequency per Million of Business-Based Title Variants in NOW



Relative Frequency per Million of Spokes-Based Title Variants in NOW



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