

# People-First Language Is Part of Our Style

Bias-Free Language in the Pages of *Structure, Function, Integration*

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**ABSTRACT** *Co-Editor-in-Chief Lina Amy Hack discusses the value of bias-free language as part of the current style guide for Structure, Function, Integration.*

On the editorial team of *Structure, Function, Integration* (SFI), we have updated our style guide in 2021 that follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*, seventeenth edition (2017), with amendments that meet the specific needs of writing for our Rolfig® Structural Integration (SI) profession. Editorial rules are both rigid and fluid; they are on one hand a well-worn path of how the English language should appear in text, and as well, there is breathing room for each author to express an individual voice. At times, there are rich debates between us on the editorial team, as well as with our authors, about how content should appear. The current guide to style and production for SFI has become even more specific about

using bias-free language and people-first discourse. This article is intended to update our readership about these editorial changes, inspire our authors to write with this cultural competence, and engage our SI profession as a whole about what it means to use bias-free language and why it is important to put people first.

It has become the modern publication standard that the written word be free from conscious or unconscious biases. Bias-free language maintains credibility, for the author and the journal, and keeps the reader's focus on the argument the author is making. It is distracting to the reader when biased language is used to

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label people, places, and/or things and it makes the work less credible in general. People-first language acknowledges the humanity of an individual or a group before the reader encounters the label the person or group belongs to. Common pitfalls include gender bias, as in always referring to all people as *him*, but can also include using stereotypes or common tropes regarding race, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status, body type, birth status, or family status. We encourage our authors to be careful to avoid language that reasonable readers might find offensive or distracting.

In recent years, readers, authors, and editors of SFI have been discussing the issue of gender-neutral language and how to apply it. As already mentioned, it has become unacceptable to apply the generic masculine, *he*, when speaking of all people. At the same time, the use of *he/she* or *s/he* can appear to readers as nontraditional gimmicks. Personally, I like taking the time to write *his and hers* or *she and he*, yet now that we are becoming more aware of people's individual preferences for various pronouns, the full long form may need to also include the gender-neutral *they*, *them*, *their*, and *themselves*. The use of *they* as a singular pronoun has become more common and is accepted more widely; and, it is SFI policy to leave it up to the author to choose this use. In general, when referring to any individual, it is correct to use their stated and specific pronoun.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017) has a few suggestions on how to achieve gender neutrality when referencing people whose gender is either not known or not part of the point the author is making:

1. Omit the pronoun. It is possible that the pronoun is just not necessary.
2. Repeat the noun. In the case where the noun and the pronoun are separated in a sentence by many words, the author can try repeating the noun.
3. Use a plural antecedent.

Example: “a contestant must conduct himself with dignity at all times” becomes

“contestants must conduct themselves with dignity at all times” (359).

4. Use an article instead of a pronoun, as in, replace the singular personal pronoun with a definite or indefinite article.

Example: “A student accused of cheating must actively waive his right to have his guidance counselor present” becomes “A student accused of cheating must actively waive the right to have a guidance counselor present” (359–360).

5. Use the neutral singular pronoun *one*.
6. Use the relative pronoun *who*.
7. Use the imperative mood.

Example: “a lifeguard must keep a close watch over children while he is monitoring the pool” becomes “keep a close watch over children while monitoring the pool” (360).

8. In moderation, use *he* or *she*.
9. Revise the sentence.

As of 2021, SFI has implemented the common practice of capitalizing racial identities such as *Black*, *Brown*, and *Person of Color* (POC) to differentiate the racial construct from the color. There is ongoing debate on whether or not to capitalize *White* when referring to racial identity. Some argue for de-capitalizing *White* to *white* as a political act of de-centering an identity marker that is historically privileged with so much visibility and power. Additionally, the capitalization of *White* has been argued to legitimize racist beliefs upheld by systems and organizations. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017) does capitalize names of ethnic and national groups and, as a matter of editorial consistency, similar terms such as *White* may also be capitalized when used in this sense.

The bottom line is that in Rolfing SI and Rolf Movement®, we are a client-centered manual therapy and somatic education profession, and here in our journal, we use person-first language to reflect our values and maintain our credibility. We encourage our Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® (DIRI) faculty, and our entire membership of

Rolfers, to become familiar with practicing person-first language when delivering their work to the public as well as with their written word. Person-first language movement started in 1974 as a challenge to the common practice to call people with disabilities – “the disabled.” The label without reference to the person had the problem of taking the humanity away from how individuals were referenced (Crocker and Smith 2019).

Language has power and people who are singled out for their group membership want to be referred to as people first, the person with diabetes does not want their public health nurse to call them ‘the diabetic in room one’; they want to hear the nurse say ‘the person with diabetes is in room one’. The American Psychological Association started to address bias in language in 1992, they proposed that only labelling people or groups of people by their group membership promoted biases and devalued the individuals leading to accentuated negative attitudes (Granello and Gibbs 2016). Listen for this in news reports; we now commonly hear ‘children with Down syndrome’, ‘people with schizophrenia’, and ‘people with addiction’. The application of this idea can vary throughout an article, and once an author has established their verbiage in a person-first style, it can be perfectly appropriate to also use label-first language to produce well-formed sentences. We encourage you to read about this topic as some groups actually prefer label-first language, a discussion beyond the scope of this article (Dunn and Andrews 2015).

Using person-first language was a response to negative biases experienced by marginalized and vulnerable people, people with disabilities needed their clinicians to use positive communication as common practice when delivering health care. This application has been expanded to all group membership, even when the group membership is positive. Between Rolfers it can be common to hear reference to a person that has been *Rolfed*. The phrase *Rolfed body* was commonly found in this journal in the

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1990s and beyond, but now we know that it is problematic. Not only is it incorrect use of our service mark, it is an outdated expression that lacks the humanity of the individual, the person is only the label. When readers encounter this term, it rings like a biased term, even though more often than not, it is intended as a positive quality about the person. When I was a Rolfing student, I was told I was a *mesomorph*. This hurt my feelings, and I thought, “Is this a round about way of calling me out as different because I’m a big person?” It would have been much better to hear, *this person has a body type that may be an example of a mesomorph*.

The reader may get distracted by the author’s unconscious bias with these kinds of word choices, the lack of person-first language may lead the reader to interpret the author’s words in a way that was never intended. There are many ways to refer to people who have experienced the full Ten Series, and in general, we want to emphasize the person who experienced the Rolfing series and not assign a stamp to them of being *Rolfed*. We have officially retired this word as it both dilutes the trademark by being an incorrect usage, as well as it diminishing the person who experienced the SI work by reducing them to a singular label.

Avoiding biased language is important for maintaining credibility with the public, to invite a wide readership to our work, the editors and authors of SFI are active with our application of bias-free language as our written style. *The Chicago Manual of Style* is clear, “Biased language that is not central to the meaning of the work distracts many readers and makes the work less credible to them” (2017, 358). The solution is people-first language, both in our writing and in our offices, so that we are applying our client-centered approach with our language as an alignment with our values. The SFI editors apply the reasoning described here to the articles on a case-by-case basis, since

each author has a unique voice and specific goal to their article, we work with them each to strive for bias-free language so that readers can focus on the ideas and not an unintended subtext.

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