

Written Task 1: Language in a Cultural Context

Rationale

I was introduced to the idea of sexist language after watching the documentary "Miss Representation" in class, which shows the frequent negative portrayals of females in the media, and how these lead to underrepresentation of women in positions of power. The documentary showed clips of news broadcasters and politicians making inappropriate comments about female politicians in public addresses. The overt sexist and unprofessional nature of these comments, and the general tolerance of them, was what inspired me to write a Part 1 written task, on language in a cultural context.

primary source text + inspiration for writing

connection to learning outcome

The media has negatively distorted the public's perception of 'feminism', leaving the majority ignorant of its actual definition. The younger generation is uninterested in feminism and politics, yet these are important issues that they, as future voters and politicians, will be confronted with. I chose to present this information in a blog post, as it is a news source relevant to the young target audience. It is posted on the website of feminist media organization, *Bitch Magazine*, whose audience (young, forward-thinking feminists) matches my own. This contemporary structure, in combination with satirical humour characteristic to this writing type, will hopefully generate interest among this generation.

speaks to purpose  
intended audience

reason for choosing the blog form.

imagined context

speaks to stylistic conventions of this type of text.

I am writing as a feminist in her early twenties, studying journalism in the United States. This persona is relatable to the target audience, in age and views on this topic. The fact that the author has no intimidating credentials/titles indicates that there are no prerequisites to be a feminist, other than an open-mind and desire for change. The overall tone is informal, using a first-person voice, humour, and posing questions to the reader. Information is organized in paragraphs, and some research is evident (through studies and quotes) to maintain a degree of professionalism as it is still an official posting on a reputable website.

persona

more on intended style and content

Word Count: 300

appropriate to this type of text and context.

## No Girls Allowed: How Sexist Language Keeps Female Candidates Out

By: *Student* | Posted Thursday, May 2, 2013, at 8:30AM



*"Calm down, dear."*

*"Trying to be more like men throws away the only advantage they have. Floppy grey pantsuits don't suit."*

*"The high-sheen lip gloss, the 'Naughty Monkey' brand red pumps, the black leather outfits, the winking, for heaven's sake. She's the original 'Mean Girl'. You want her, but you can't have her."*

These are not, in fact, lines from 1960s sitcoms. These are recent quotes taken from real politicians and journalists describing female politicians. Shocked? Don't be. This is only the tip of the patriarchal iceberg.

The rally against of sexist language has surfaced recently, in light of many political addresses painting an unflattering and outdated perception of female politicians. Sexist language includes any word that demeans, excludes or stereotypes members of either sex, or that make unnecessary distinctions between sexes. Prime examples of this type of language are words like "fireman", "chairman", or, "congressman". When was the last time you addressed a group of people as, "you guys", or referred to a product as, "man-made"? Exactly. This situation is especially dangerous because most of the words in question are so widely accepted and ingrained into our vocabulary that we don't even recognize their marginalizing effect.

This type of speech is especially common in politics, where female politicians are much more likely to experience sexism from the media and fellow opponents than their male colleagues. For the most part, the media is concerned with the type of lipstick on their mouth, rather than the words coming out of it. An organization called Name It. Change It. is leading the crusade against sexist language in the media, and recently conducted a study on how neutral, positive, and negative discussion of a female candidate's physical appearance affects her chances with voters. A control group not exposed to any stories on her looks was split 50/50. Results showed that neutral comments on her appearance lost her 4 points, positive feedback lost her 6 points, and negative coverage lost her 7 points. When a female candidate's physical appearance is mentioned four times more than a man's, it's no wonder we have such a sad number of females in politics.

Not only does it turn off voters, placing her physical appearance over her skills undermines her effectiveness in the job. It reduces her to an object that is meant to be seen, not heard. This misogynistic language affects all of us, political aspirations or not, because it perpetuates the idea that women are inferior to men and thus they are

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incapable of holding influential positions in society. From Name It. Change It.'s study, we know that this language discourages voters from selecting female candidates, which causes a lack of female representation in the government or other avenues of power. Now, imagine young girls growing up in this patriarchal society, where the government is almost exclusively men, and words like "congressman", "policeman", and "businessman" are thrown around. They are groomed to believe that they are inherently unsuited for certain jobs, so they shouldn't even bother trying.

Now, we cannot ignore the male side of the issue as well, as one of the worst misconceptions of modern feminism is that it is a battle of the sexes, Man vs. Woman. Part of the movement to redefine feminism is to recognize that men are not the enemy. Men can be feminists, and men can be affected by sexist language as well. The same study that showed a decrease in votes when a female candidate's appearance was criticized also showed a decrease the male opponent's support. The voters assumed that the male played a role in the defamation of the woman. The goal is change the oppressive gender roles fed to us by the media, not to condemn men as the root of the problem.

That being said, here are a few ways anyone can join the fight against sexist language in their everyday life:

### The Reversibility Test

- Can/would the same statement be applied to either gender? If the media coverage fails this test, it is sexist. This includes specific words, phrases, or topics. Don't devote an entire article to what Sarah Palin wore, or speculation on whether Hilary Clinton had a facelift done if you wouldn't do the same for a male candidate. Unless you also wish to question the male politician's ability to raise a family while juggling his work responsibilities, do not ask it of the female politician.

### Take a stand against sexist language!

- The same study that showed a negative correlation between sexist media coverage and the female candidate's support also showed that when the candidate addressed the issue, she gained back almost all of the support. If you see a sexist comment in the media, report it at [www.nameitchangeit.org](http://www.nameitchangeit.org).

### Use gender-neutral language

- No patronizing terms in professional situations as they serve to infantilize or romanticize female candidates. Forgoing their professional titles shows ignorance and a lack of respect towards them.
  - o Dear, sweetheart
  - o Little woman/girl (referring to adult woman)
- Neutral terminology
  - o Mankind → Humanity
  - o Stewardess → Flight attendant
  - o They, their
  - o He or she, his or her

Now that you have been made aware of the issue, you can start making a difference. Just as our predecessors fought their battles for women's suffrage, or equal civil rights, we too will overcome this challenge.

Or as Neil Armstrong *should* have said, "One small step for people, one giant leap for all of humanity." Admittedly not as eloquent as the original, but you get my meaning.