

Make Sure Your Words Are Relevant The guideline suggested in Garner's *Modern American Usage* and *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* is to avoid using a gender-specific noun unless sex is relevant to the discussion. Usually it isn't. Sex doesn't typically matter when you're talking about doctors or authors, for example. ⁶⁰ But what about when sex is relevant? Another case in point: "actress." Male and female actors usually play different kinds of roles, so it's useful for people in show business to make this distinction. If "actress" saves them from having to use "female actor," why not use it? Unfortunately, even if you follow this guideline of using gender-neutral ⁶⁵ noun forms in most cases, and gender-specific nouns only when sex is relevant, the problem remains. You'll end up using female-specific terms to talk specifically about women, but where's the analogous ⁷ male-specific term? If there isn't one, you may still be sending a message that a woman doing some job is surprising news. And indeed, although ⁷⁰ there is sometimes a good reason to use the word "actress" that hasn't stopped it from acquiring negative connotations, ⁸ as we're told by a contact in the industry. In cases like these, where linguistic change is ongoing, the usage of the audience you're writing for can be a good guide. If a certain community ⁷⁵ uses "actress" where they are clearly not devaluing ⁹ women's acting, feel free to do likewise. If they insist on "actor" across the board, you may want to follow suit