A Historical Perspective on Gendered Language in Writing Studies Journals

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Abstract: This article examines how writing studies scholarship has responded to changes in society's understanding of gender. Combining grounded theory and corpus linguistic analysis using a self-compiled corpus of journal issues published between 1970-2020, the authors track changes in the usage of gendered versus gender-neutral nouns and pronouns with generic referents. While the analysis of pronouns was inconclusive, patterns of noun usage in writing studies journals over time reveal an overall preference for gender-neutral language and a reduction in masculine-coded nouns across several journals in the 1970s and 1990s. Analyzing the changing language of this scholarship using a combination of methodologies from writing studies and linguistics reveals how the discipline thinks about gender in a concrete, practice-informed way.

In 2012, Anne Curzan called on the various subfields of English studies to embrace corpus linguistics, arguing that it can provide "bridges in the conversation among scholars from various disciplines" (2012, p. 10). Corpus-based linguistic studies are analyses based on a large collection, or corpus, of texts. Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, and Randi Reppen (1998) further define the "essential characteristics of corpus-based analysis":

- It is empirical, analyzing the actual patterns of [language] use in natural texts;

- It utilizes a large and principled collection of natural texts, known as a "corpus," as the basis for analysis;

- It makes extensive use of computers for analysis, using both automatic and interactive techniques;

- It depends on both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques (p. 4).

Despite the so-called linguistic turn (Matsuda, 2013) in writing studies, relatively few writing studies[1] scholars outside the subfields of second-language writing and English for Academic Purposes have taken up Curzan's call to utilize the vast knowledge available to us via corpus studies (according to the definition above) in the decade since, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Aull, 2022; Blazer and DeCapua, 2020; Brown and Wetzel, 2023; Dryer, 2019). Fewer still have used corpora to undertake studies of diachronic language change—language change over time, including up to the present day—as it relates to topics within writing studies, again with some exceptions (Johnson, 2019). Laura Aull (2022) argues that corpus methods complement more traditional writing studies methods—which typically consider one text at a time in detail—by revealing patterns that persist

across many texts, thereby "highlighting the systematicity and sociality of all language use" (p. 139). Diachronic corpus studies—and historical approaches to language in general—can thereby illuminate changes not only in the words we use, but in the attitudes, values, and practices of writing studies as a field.

Rebecca Bigler and Campbell Leaper (2015) draw upon the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states "language shapes the way people perceive and think about the world," (p. 187) to describe this phenomenon. The words we use reflect society, but conversely, society also affects the words we choose to use, which can be seen through historical shifts in the language over time. Often, these shifts occur alongside changes in societal standards, including an issue that has remained pervasive and evolving since the 19th century with the first wave of feminism (Malinowska, 2020): the constant fight over gender equality and the role gender should play in society.

In this article, we combine diachronic corpus analysis with grounded theory (a form of textual analysis more common to writing studies) to examine how the field of writing studies has responded to changes in our understanding of gender over the last fifty years, as reflected in gendered language used in several of the field's top journals. Though early language theorists and grammarians often framed preference for gendered language such as the generic *he* as a matter of grammatical efficiency or stylistic preference (as we will discuss below), scholars such as Curzan (2003) have highlighted the "semantic and social implications" of these practices and argued that a greater understanding of the historical details of gendered language "might inform our understanding of…what is at stake" (p. 58). While publications and organizations within writing studies often outwardly argue for progressive gender policy (CCCC, 2023), our analysis—a conversation between writing and language studies methodologies—reveals the less obvious patterns that define how we as a discipline think about gender.

These patterns are especially important to examine in the present cultural moment, when queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people and scholarship are increasingly under attack. If our language not only reflects our values, but shapes them, it is crucial that the language used in writing studies publications does not perpetuate a false gender binary and instead represents gender as fluid and dynamic. Moreover, we must understand how our scholarship has responded to and contributed to historical conceptions of gender so we can fully account for our role in perpetuating gender binaries and stereotypes. Diachronic corpus analysis can reveal where we are, where we have been, and where we're going. Dylan B. Dryer (2019), quoting linguist Michael Stubbs, notes that corpus analysis enables us to

> know at least a few more…facts we couldn't know we didn't know because approaching language at the scale afforded by corpus analytics reveals facts of discourse "rarely imagined because they could never be directly observed" (Stubbs, 128). Understanding these patterns allows us to ask whether this is what we *want* these words to mean (p. 250, emphasis in original).

The key question, then, is: Are the words we as a field use to refer to gender meaning what we want them to mean? We address this by examining diachronic changes in the use of gendered nouns when referring to hypothetical people, as well as patterns in the use of gendered versus gender-neutral personal pronouns as epicene pronouns (pronouns referring to a generic referent without a predetermined gender). These patterns situate writing studies within a larger history of evolving attitudes toward gendered language.

A History of Gender Bias in Language

It is useful here to briefly distinguish between the concepts of linguistic and natural gender. In language, a natural gender system reflects (more or less) the way its speakers think about gender. Modern English is an example in that, for the most part, speakers only use gendered language when referring to people or animals. Curzan (2003) defines linguistic gender as "a system of noun classification reflected in the behavior of associated words" (p. 13). In languages that are linguistically marked for gender, including Spanish and Old English, gender is reflected in the morphology of words themselves (including words referring to inanimate objects that we would not think of as having natural gender) and grammatical phrases must demonstrate gender agreement in their pronouns and adjectives.

While English lost its linguistic gender system in the transition from Old to Middle English, some nouns have retained lexical reference to natural gender. For instance, *boy* holds a masculine definition while *girl* holds a feminine definition. This can also be seen in such nouns as *son, brother, sister,* and *daughter* as well as within common occupational titles like *policeman* or *chairman*, in which the masculine *-man* is used to label the title as masculine. In this article, when we refer to "gendered language," it is this type of language—that which retains lexical reference to natural gender—that we refer to. Bigler and Leaper argue, though, that the use of gendered nouns like these can typically be avoided with the use of a gender-neutral noun with a similar meaning. *Boy* and *girl* could instead be referred to as *child*, or *brother* and *sister* could be rewritten as *sibling*. Similarly, the occupational titles have adopted gender-neutral terms to refer to the same job position, but without a gendered bias. *Chairman* and *policeman* could easily be replaced with *chair/chairperson* or *police officer*, respectively. Not only does the gender-neutral form of these words often create a more encompassing term to refer to what is essentially the same concept, but a gender-neutral word also reflects the modern language ideals that have been adapted over time to reflect a society that is questioning the gender binary and the purpose of gender roles.

The shift towards using more gender-neutral language dates back nearly half a century to the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s (Bigler & Leaper, 2015). This movement called for a lexical revamping to remove many of the sexist aspects of the English language which had been commonplace before, such as masculine-leaning nouns used in a generic manner. Masculine nouns such as *men* and *mankind* were commonly used to generically refer to a wide range of people despite their semantic inappropriateness as they completely neglected to include the female and nonbinary community (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017). However, at this point in time, nonsexist language reform was primarily concerned with the needs of cisgender women.

A similar masculine bias is evident in the history of pronoun use. As previously noted, early preferences for the generic *he* were often framed not as a matter of ideology, but of style. Dennis Baron (2020) cites William Lily's 1549 *A Short Introduction of Grammar* and William Strunk and E.B. White's 1999 edition of *The Elements of Style*, both of which advocated for the generic *he*, to illustrate its long endurance. The 1979 edition of *The Elements of Style*, Baron explains, described the epicene usage of *he or she*[2] as "boring or silly" while offering this somewhat ominous warning about attempting an epicene she: "Try it and see what happens" (qtd. in Baron, 2020, p. 40). Baron continues:

Elements of Style even insisted, with no data to back up the claim, that generic *he*

> "has lost all suggestion of maleness...It is never incorrect." But the authors were wrong.
> *He* had never lost its maleness, and by 1999, although continuing to recommend the form,
> the *Elements of Style* conceded that "many writers find the use of generic *he* or
> *his*...limiting or offensive" (Baron, 2020, pp. 40-41).

Here, Strunk and White, authors of what many consider to be the definitive guide to English grammar, continued to recommend a gendered epicene pronoun that they acknowledge can be offensive, essentially prioritizing perceived style over inclusivity.

Despite Strunk and White's advice, pronoun usage became more inclusive (of cisgender women) in the 1970s. Curzan (2014) identifies Robin Lakoff's 1975 book *Language and Woman's Place* as the "spark for modern language and gender research" (p. 117) that eventually led to widespread reconsideration and eventual condemnation of the epicene *he.* In terms of actual language use, a study utilizing the Brown and LOB families of corpora found that the gender-neutral epicene phrase *he or she* rose exponentially across registers in both the 1960s and 1990s in British and American English, again corresponding with nonsexist language reform efforts (Paterson, 2020).

The use of *they* as an epicene pronoun is perhaps even more controversial than early uses of *he or she*. *They* is commonly used today as a singular epicene pronoun. It is the most common singular epicene pronoun in both formal and informal spoken English (Balhorn, 2004) and is increasingly used in writing: a 2015 study of Brigham Young University's *TIME* magazine corpus found that *they* became the most common singular epicene pronoun used in the publication in the 2000s (Hall, 2015). It is even accepted as a singular gender-neutral pronoun by many style guides–including the *MLA Handbook*, *Chicago Manual of Style*, *APA Publication Manual*, and the European Commission's *English Style Guide* (Grove, 2021). One of the primary arguments for its acceptance is its inclusivity of all genders, including nonbinary and nonconforming gender identities,[3] while maintaining conciseness. Prescriptivists, however, may note that this usage violates number concord. In a sentence such as "A student should submit their homework promptly," the argument goes, the plural pronoun *their* refers to the singular subject *student*. Yet, despite the seeming logic of this argument, objections to *they* as a singular epicene pronoun did not gain traction until the nineteenth century; it was commonly used throughout the centuries before.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2013) traces the use of the singular *they* to 1375. Ann Bodine (1975) notes that, despite the form's widespread use, "in formal analyses of the English pronominal system" in the nineteenth century, it was "incorrectly analyzed as only plural in meaning…[and] prescriptive grammarians tried to change the language to their conception of it." (p. 133) Rather than advocate for a nonsexist alternative, she argues, their choice of epicene pronoun (generic *he*) was "dictated by an androcentric world-view; linguistically, human beings were to be considered male unless proven otherwise" (p. 133). Singular *they*, however, continued to be used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries despite its proscription: a study of quotations used in the *Oxford English Dictionary* found that 23% of instances of *they* occur as a singular epicene pronoun in every century since the seventeenth (Balhorn, 2004).

Today, though singular *they* is widely used as a more inclusive alternative, Charlotte Stormbom (2019) explains that it is far from universal. In fact, even writers who employ *they* as a singular epicene pronoun tend to do so alongside another singular epicene (such as *he or she*, which, while inclusive of cisgender women, still perpetuates the gender binary). Pronoun choice, she continues, also varies with register (with singular *they* being less common in formal writing) and antecedent (with definite noun phrases co-occurring most often with gendered pronouns, even when the gender of the referent is unspecified).

There are few studies that examine pronouns specifically in the context of academic writing, but the ones that exist have reached interesting, sometimes-contradictory conclusions. While a study by Peter Hegarty and Carmen Buechel (2006) suggests that the epicene *he* has more or less disappeared from journals published by the American Psychological Association, another by Alejandro Parini (2012) finds that it accounts for the majority of personal pronouns (37%) in social science textbooks published between 1995 and 2005. In a corpus of open-access research articles from the fields of

language & linguistics and library & information sciences, Stormbom (2020) found that *they* was the most common singular epicene pronoun, followed by *he or she*, though the singular generic *he* was still used. With the few linguistic studies we have of gendered language in academic writing not painting a coherent picture, the need for further systematic, practice-informed research into our scholarly language practices—and the implicit values that inform them—becomes clear.

Study Design

We want to emphasize that, in the spirit of finding methodological confluence between writing and language studies, our design is an adaptation of corpus linguistic analysis that is suitable for our goals as scholars whose primary work is in writing studies. We believe that combining corpus analysis with writing studies methods such as grounded theory can, as Aull and Dryer each argue above, provide a richer picture of the linguistic data. The present study examines diachronic change in gendered language in writing studies journals using a self-compiled "stable mini-corpus" (Curzan and Palmer, 2006, p. 19) containing six journals: *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*, *College English*, *Composition Studies*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *WAC Journal*.

As discussed above, typical corpus studies use a large, principled, representative collection of texts. It is important to note, however, that these corpora often take years to develop and many are easily available to researchers or the general public. For example, the British National Corpus, which contains representative samples from written and spoken British English across time and genre, was built between 1991-1994, with updates and revisions in 2001 and 2007 (Burnard, 2022). While these corpora are large, systematic, and representative, they are too general to answer questions about a genre as specific as writing studies journals.

It's fair to note that a truly representative corpus or writing studies journals would include every issue of every writing studies journal available. However, that is not practical given our resources and research goals. Anne Curzan and Chris C. Palmer (2006, p. 20) argue that "recognizing the diversity of our research goals in historical corpus-based linguistics allows us to exploit the possibilities offered by unprincipled corpora" and that corpora can be adapted to fit researchers' goals. While we wouldn't call our corpus entirely "unprincipled," we recognize that it is not perfectly representative of the field. However, it is tailored to our research questions, as explained below, as well as to the special issue's goal of finding methodological confluences between writing and language studies.

Deciding early on to limit the number of journals to six, we selected the journals in our corpus due to their range of focuses and the fact that, with the exception of *WAC Journal*, their archives date back at least to the 1970s. This allowed us to explore a wide expanse of time while still allowing the study to remain concentrated on the modern developments in gendered language. With publications other than *WAC Journal*, we identified 1970 or 1975 as a starting year (depending on whether the journal in question published in 1970) to correspond with the second-wave feminist movement (Bigler and Leaper, 2015). Often, the reason we opted to include one journal over another to represent a subfield (for instance, *TESOL Quarterly* over *Journal of Second Language Writing*) was the fact that it was publishing in the 1970s.

To build the corpus, we manually downloaded every article in every issue, combined the articles, and exported the resulting PDF to a plain text file.[4] For older issues that were scanned PDFs, we underwent the additional step of processing it with OCR software and verifying its output. Had we elected to do this with every issue of the journals we selected, we would still be exporting PDFs. To limit the size of our study corpus while still providing diachronic data, we used journal issues published every five years—the largest number of files we could reasonably process while staying on track with our deadlines. As our goals focus on examining change over time, we opted for

consistency in choosing issues published every five years rather than ensuring a representative selection of topics, authors, etc.

The first two we examined, *CCC* and *Composition Studies,* are well-established in composition and cover a range of topics within the field. In addition to articles on composition and rhetoric, *College English* publishes pieces that center on post-secondary education more generally, adding a more explicit pedagogical focus. *Journal of Basic Writing*, as its title suggests, focuses specifically on the subfield of basic writing: pedagogy tailored to writing courses that precede or supplement firstyear writing, providing additional support or preparation for college writing. The final two journals added to our corpus were *TESOL Quarterly* and *WAC Journal*. *TESOL Quarterly* focuses on the instruction of English as a second language. While not a writing studies journal specifically, we felt it was important to include this perspective due to writing studies' historical lack of engagement with ESL perspectives (Matsuda, 1999). Even though *WAC Journal* only dates back to 1990 and contains far fewer published issues, we included it due to its specific focus on the subfield of Writing across the Curriculum, which we knew would be of particular interest to the audience of *Across the Disciplines*. Table 1 indicates the total number of issues included in our mini-corpus.

Table 1: Corpus Journals, Issues, and Date Ranges

Journal Title	Date Range	Number of Issues
CCC	1970-2020	44
Composition Studies	1975-2020	21
Journal of Basic Writing	1975-2020	19
College English	1970-2020	26
TESOL Quarterly	1970-2020	25
WAC Journal	1990-2020	7
Total		**142**

Again, our study set out to analyze the following diachronic changes in writing studies' journals use of gendered language:

- The "assigned gender" (Guzmán-González, 2013) of the hypothetical academic citizen, as measured by the usage frequency of gendered versus gender-neutral nouns/noun phrases (*freshman* vs. *first-year student*, *chairman* vs. *chair/chairperson*, etc.)

- Overall changes in the use of gendered nouns (*man*, *woman*, etc.) when not referring to specific people

- Patterns in the use of gendered (*he*, *she*) versus gender-neutral pronouns (singular *they*) as epicene pronouns

Methods

Gender Bias in Nouns

For this portion of the analysis, we further limited the corpus by selecting only two journal issues per year. While this may have further affected the representativeness of our data, this allowed us to maintain a more consistent sample size from each journal and each year. We chose both a spring and a fall issue—with the exception of 1975 and 2015 in *Journal of Basic Writing*, which only published one issue during those years—to account for potential shifts in style guidelines while maintaining consistency. We used the corpus analysis tool AntConc to search for target words and explore them in context so we could analyze whether the noun is being used to refer to a generic referent or is specifically referencing an individual or group. In order to compare results across journals, we searched each journal (*CCC*, *College English*, etc.) as a separate sub-corpus.

The process of composing our list of search terms follows the constructivist concept of grounded theory, which Migliaccio and Melzer (2011) define as a method which builds its own framework and evolves it based on the qualitative data previously found in the study. Jørgensen (2001) further simplifies this idea to be the coordination of data collection and analysis to create the borders of a study rather than relying on frameworks set by previous studies. While not typically used in conjunction with corpus studies, using a qualitative, grounded approach more common to writing studies allowed us to tailor our search terms more specifically to this specialized corpus. We started with words we knew would be frequent in the study (such as the generic *man* and the generic *person*) and used the results we found to add additional search terms as needed. Though an uncommon approach to corpus linguistic research (we don't know of any other corpus studies that incorporate grounded theory), this usage of grounded theory allowed us to approach the study with words that fit the subject of our corpus best.

Words that we chose for this study were categorized into three different subsets depending on whether the word leaned toward a more masculine definition, a more feminine definition, or a gender-neutral definition. In Table 2, we highlight the specific words within each category that we searched for.

Table 2: Corpus Search Words

Masculine-Leaning Words	man, men, boy, brother
Gender-Neutral Words	person, people, human, child, sibling, first-year [student]
Feminine-Leaning Words	woman, women, girl, sister

The search terms picked for this study were chosen based on general patterns we had observed early in the study. Typically, these base words were picked to be counterparts for one another (e.g., *boy, girl,* and *child*), in which the primary difference in the word's definition was the gender they conveyed.

With words like *man*, we added an asterisk before and after the word, which returned all results containing the word *man*. This allowed us to gather data on such words as *mankind* and *chairman* that still display a male bias in their centering of the morpheme *man*. One of the most prominent words we found through this method was *freshman* and *freshmen*. This term was so common that it

led us to include the term *first-year* (as in *first-year student*) to our study as a gender-neutral counterpart to the concept of *freshman*.

To explore these gendered nouns, though, we needed a way to differentiate between gendered nouns used in a referential manner and ones used in a generic manner. We manually checked each occurrence of our target words and tallied each type of generic gendered noun (masculine-leaning, gender-neutral, and feminine-leaning). Each instance was added up and compared.

Gender Bias in Epicene Pronouns

Examining the use of third-person personal pronouns across six journals over the span of sixty years proved to be a somewhat Herculean task. Because epicene pronouns are identical in form to referential pronouns, there is (currently) no easy way to reliably conduct a comprehensive corpus search for epicene pronouns other than *he or she*, which is always epicene. Trinidad Guzmán-González (2013), in a corpus study of pronouns and other gendered language referring to animals in zoological research, notes that it takes less time to read the articles manually than it does to verify the referents of pronouns identified by corpus analysis software. While this may be true in many cases, when working with a corpus of 142 academic journal articles, manual scanning (or even manual verification of all possible epicene pronouns in a software-generated pronoun list) is not feasible.

Stormbom (2020), in the previously-referenced study, explained her method for narrowing her results in her corpus analysis program, WordSmith, to pronouns that are more likely to be epicene:

> The search queries in WordSmith were defined as combinations of specific search terms followed within 25 words by the three types of epicene pronouns (see Gerner, 2000; Laitinen, 2007; Stormbom, 2019, 2020). The restriction of 25 words was applied because the first instance of a pronoun can be expected to occur within this distance from the antecedent in the vast majority of cases (Gerner, 2000; Laitinen, 2007). The search terms were of four kinds: (a) the articles *a*, *an*, *the*, (b) the determiners *this* and *that*, (c) the quantifiers *any*, *each*, *every*, *no*, and *some*, and (d) the indefinite pronouns *anyone/anybody*, *everyone/everybody*, *no one/nobody*, and *someone/somebody*. By searching for articles, determiners and quantifiers in combination with epicene pronouns, a higher number of relevant instances could be extracted. (p. 197)

In WordSmith, this is most easily done using the concord tool, which returns all instances of a search term and displays the immediate context of each occurrence. For example, you could use this tool to search for each token of *the* occurring within 25 words of *they*. The tokens of *they* returned with this limitation have a higher chance of being epicene, though they must be verified manually.

While we initially tried to adapt this methodology, even that returned too many results. With each journal sub-corpus, we ran a concordance search of one possibly-epicene pronoun (*they*, for instance) occurring within 25 words of one of Stormbom's search terms (which, using WordSmith's advanced features, we combined into one search). In a representative result, the search for *they* occurring within 25 words of Stormbom's search terms in *CCC* revealed 2131 tokens. See Figure 1 for a partial list, as the full list is too large to fit in a single screenshot and the full results aren't necessary (it is also not necessary for the results themselves to be legible, as the intent is to communicate the sheer volume of the results). Searches for *he* returned even more results.

Figure 1: Partial concordance results for they and Stormbom (2020)'s search terms in CCC

In addition to the number of results, readers may notice that the search returned duplicate results: If a token of they appeared within 25 words of both the and somebody, it was counted twice and duplicate results would need to be manually excluded before results could be manually verified. This, coupled with the fact that we would need to run multiple searches on each journal sub-corpus (searching separately for *he*, *he or she* and each of its variations, and *they*[5]) and manually verify each result, made this methodology unworkable for our study.

However, rather than abandon this research question entirely, we turned to a method that would yield less thorough, more exploratory results (but results nonetheless). In the previously referenced study of epicene pronouns in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Mark Balhorn (2004) identified epicene pronouns by searching for those occurring within ten words of *everybody* and *everyone* (generic, gender-neutral, singular antecedents). Adapting his general methodology but taking our context range of 25 words from Stormbom in order to pull more results, we used WordSmith to identify each occurrence of *he*, *he or she*, and *they* across each journal in our corpus before manually verifying which had generic referents. Because this process did not return many results, we did not limit the search to two issues per journal per year. Instead, the search for epicene pronouns was carried out with all issues published in the years under study.

Results and Discussion

Gender Bias in Nouns

Figures 2-7 present the usage of gendered nouns over the past fifty years through percentages based on the total of our tallied search terms. We choose to present our findings here via percentages to enable more direct comparison between journals, as each journal set had (sometimes vastly) different total word counts. For the raw frequency of each gendered noun analyzed, see online dataset listed in the references (Riggins & Sladek, 2024). Each figure depicts one of the journals within our study corpus.
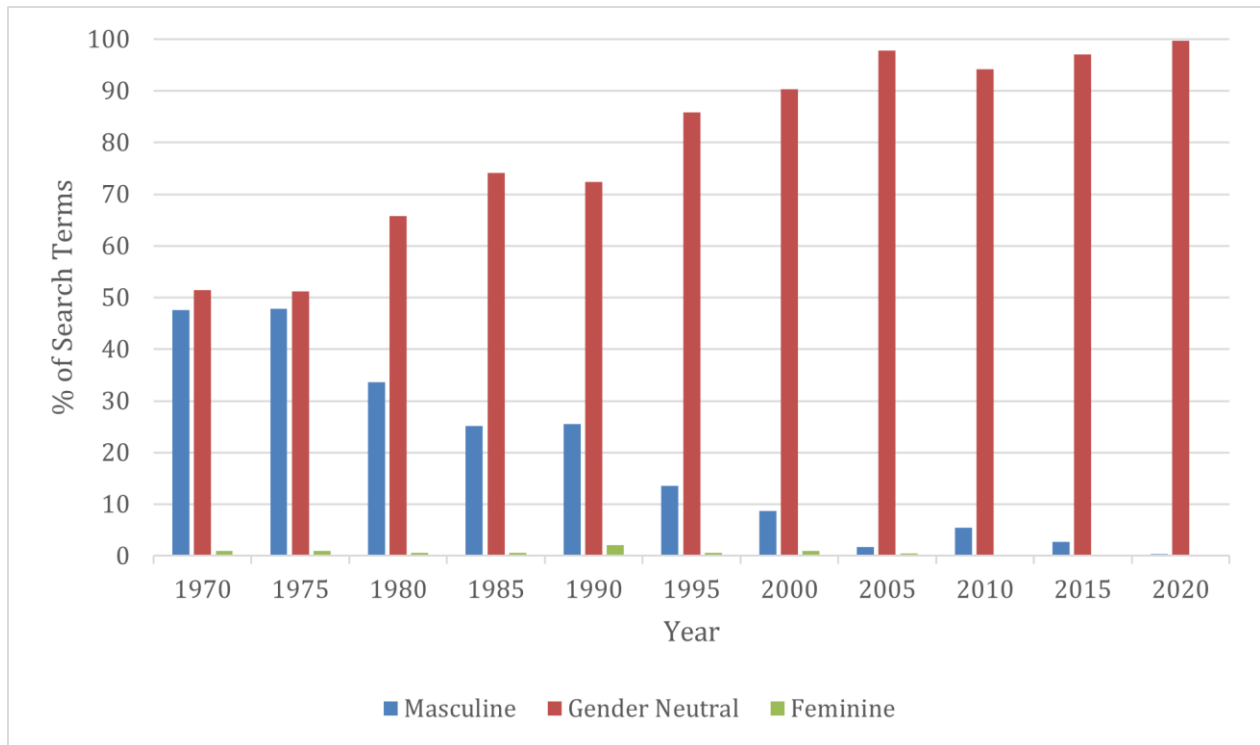
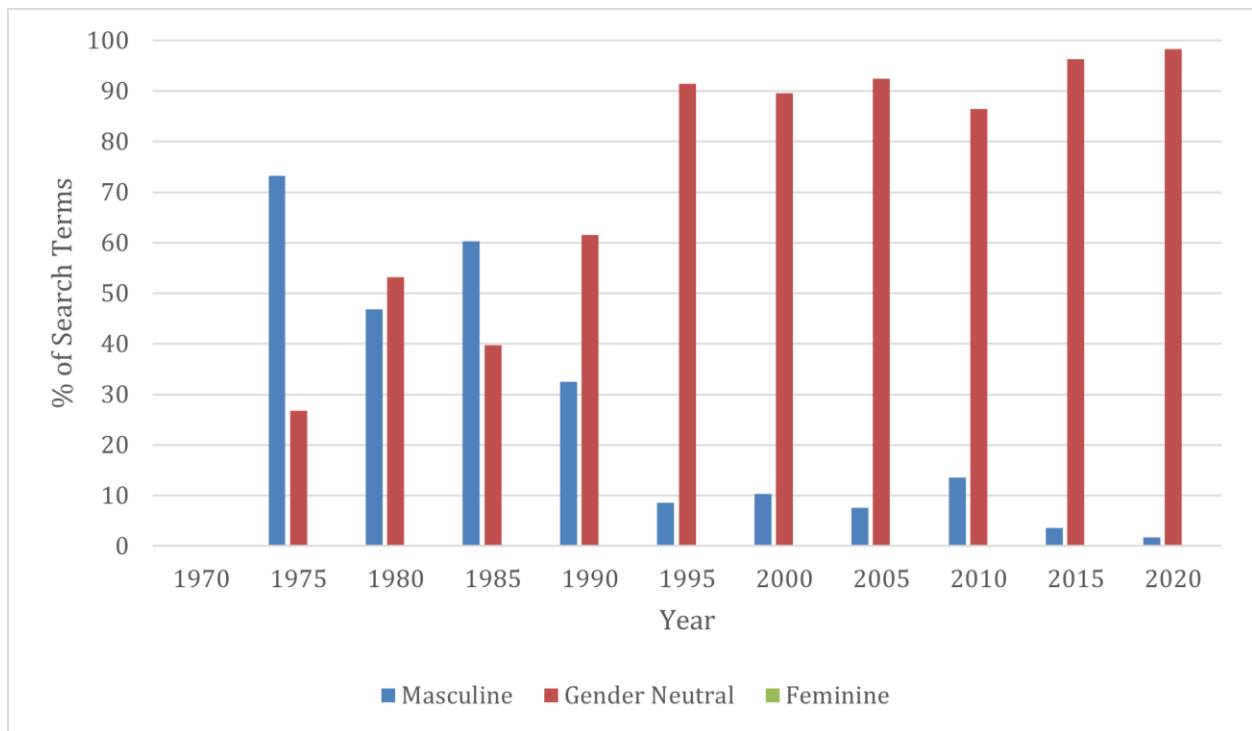*Figure 2: Distribution of Gendered Nouns in* CCC

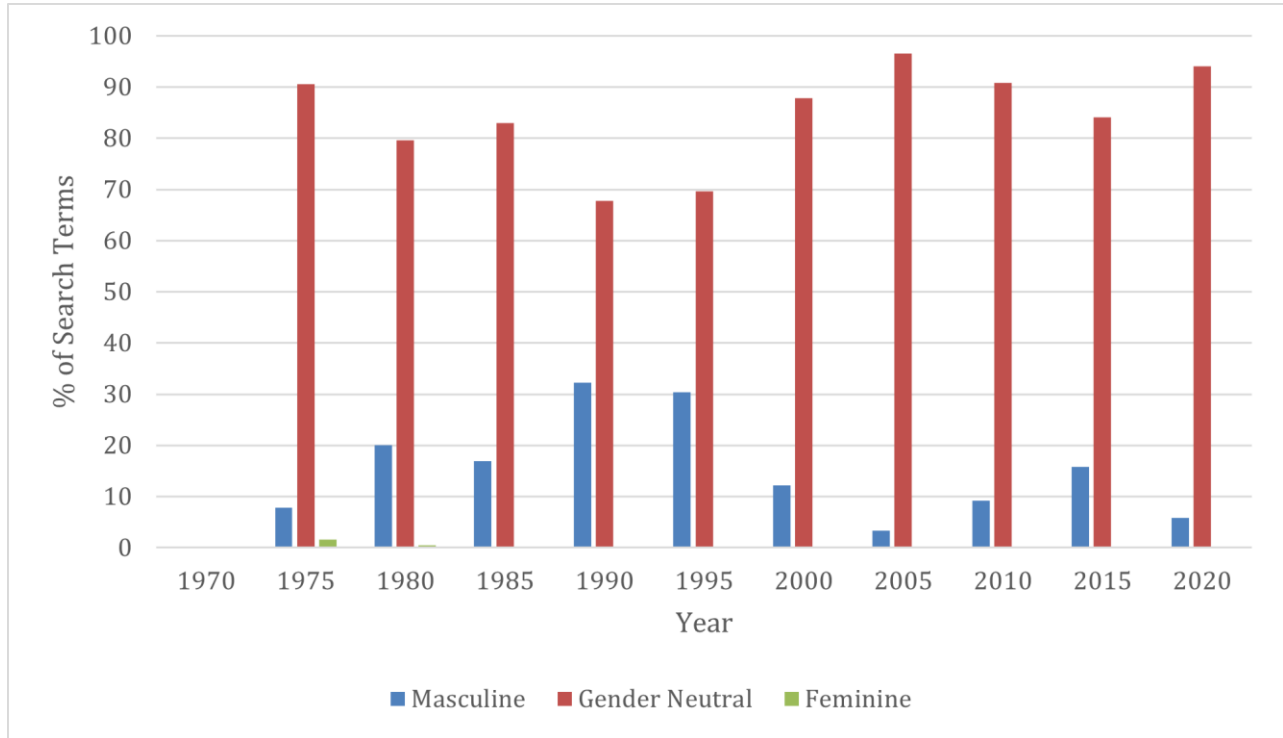*Figure 3: Distribution of Gendered Nouns in* Composition Studies

Figure 4: Distribution of Gendered Nouns in Journal of Basic Writing
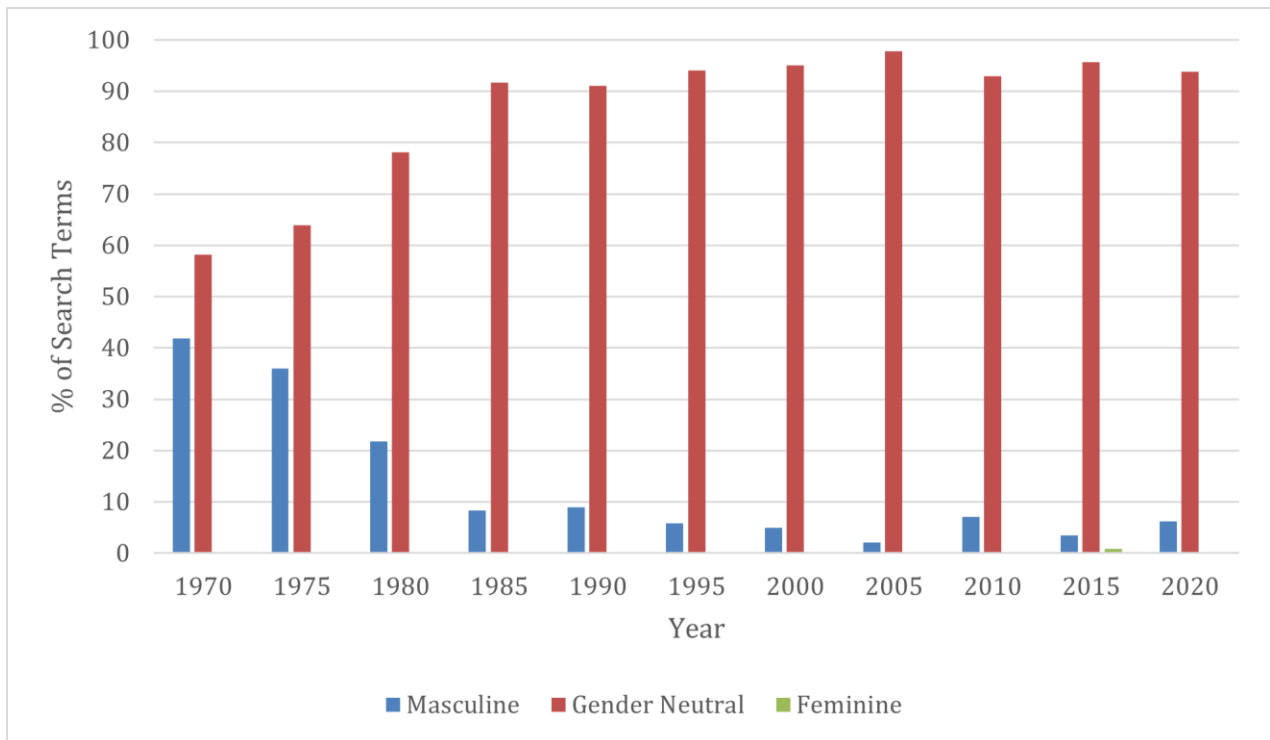

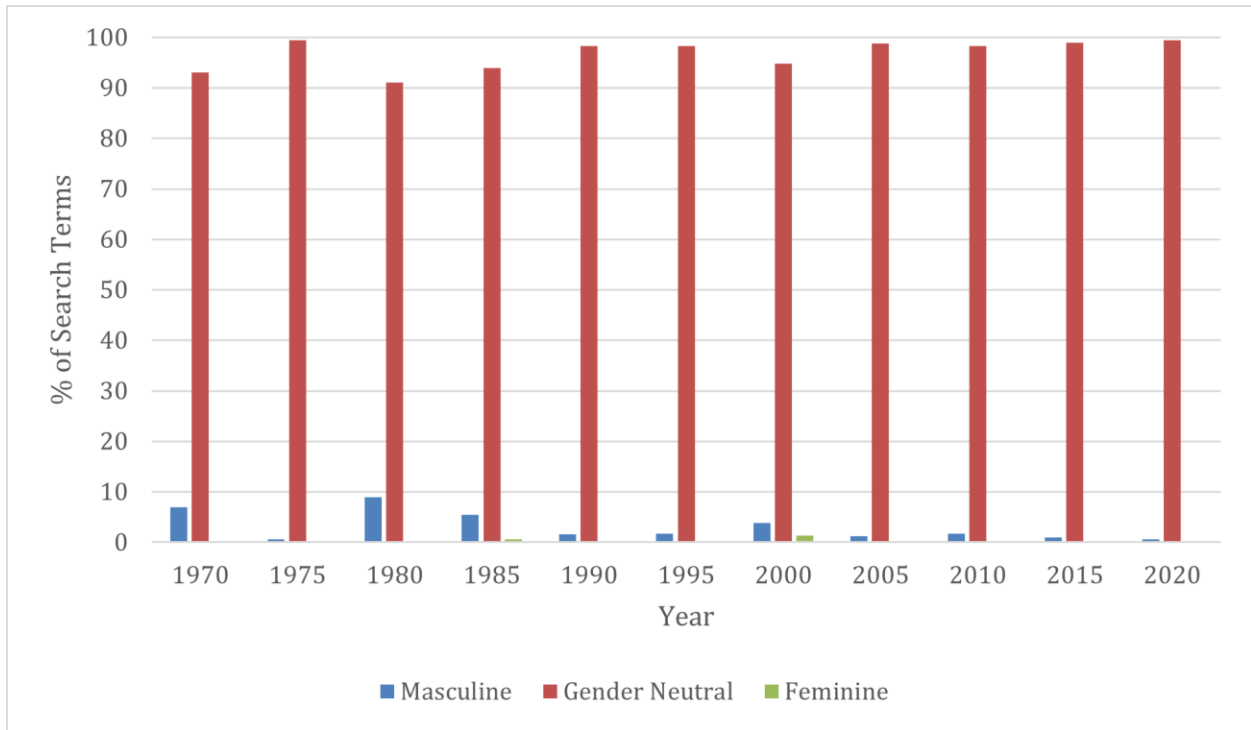*Figure 5: Distribution of Gendered Nouns in* College English

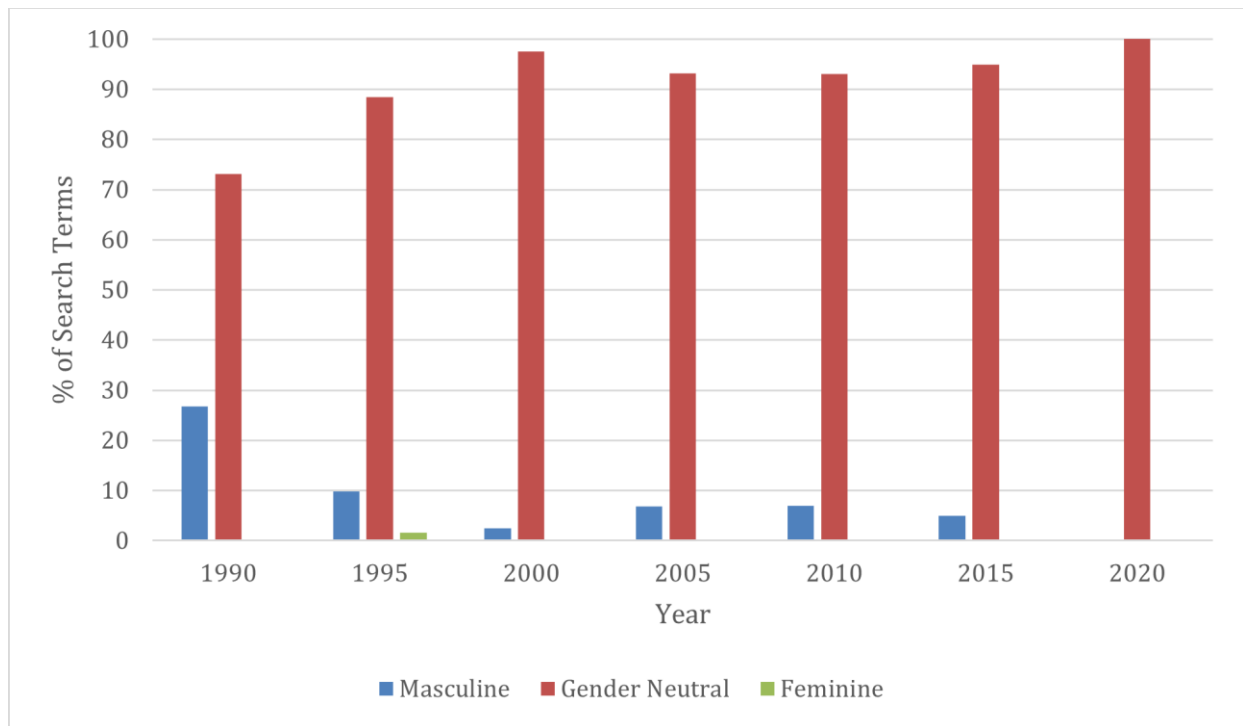*Figure 6: Distribution of Gendered Nouns in* TESOL Quarterly

Figure 7: Distribution of Gendered Nouns in WAC Journal

Based on these findings, we can make some general observations. The first is the general shifts found in the results. While gender-neutral language is almost always most common overall, we do see an overall decrease in the use of generic masculine-leaning nouns over time. This can be seen most obviously in the results we gather from journals like *CCC* and *Composition Studies,* which start with either equal usage of masculine-leaning nouns and gender-neutral nouns or with more masculine nouns. This pattern can also be seen in some of our other results, such as *College English* and *WAC Journal*, though not as dramatically.

The first of these recurring patterns occurs early in the years under study. Most journals that published in the 1970s had their highest rates of masculine nouns with generic referents during that time period. Typically, a change can be seen in 1980 where they start dropping their usage of masculine-leaning nouns in favor of gender-neutral nouns. This can be seen most obviously in *CCC* and *College English,* which both have similar trajectories in their graphs. *CCC* remains about half-and-half with their masculine-leaning and gender-neutral noun usage until a drop in 1980 when the usage of gender-neutral nouns rose to 66% and the usage of masculine-leaning nouns dropped to 34%. In *College English,* this pattern is similar, showing a significant increase from 64% usage to 78% usage for gender-neutral nouns while the usage of masculine-leaning nouns fell. Even in the results of a journal like *Composition Studies*, which appears to be more sporadic, we took note that masculine-leaning nouns dropped dramatically from 75% down to 50%, which the gender-neutral noun usage mirrored by rising from about a 25% usage to 50%.

The second major change we noted was a shift occurring around 1990-2000. This can be seen most clearly in the journals *CCC*, *Composition Studies*, and even *WAC Journal*, which had its inaugural issue in 1990—the beginning of this shift. For each of these journals, we noticed a considerable drop in the usage of masculine-leaning nouns while the usage of gender-neutral nouns rose. This ended at a point where the usage of masculine-leaning nouns was consistently less than 10%, with few outlying exceptions. Likewise, the usage of gender-neutral nouns with generic referents was almost always above 90% after the year 2000 with the only exceptions being *Composition Studies* in 2010 at 86% gender-neutral noun usage (with 43% being *first-year* alone*)* and *Journal of Basic Writing* in 2015 at 84% (with 24 uses of *first-year*, accounting for just under 50% of the gender-neutral nouns in that issue*)*.

It's also worth noting that the usage of generic feminine nouns remained minimal to nonexistent. The percentage of feminine-leaning non-referential nouns never reached above 5%, with the highest number of feminine-leaning nouns in one year being four. The most significant usage of the generic feminine-leaning noun was in particular phrases like *sister units* or *sister classes* in which the noun was adjectival. There was rarely any generic usage of the feminine nouns *woman, women*, or *girl* found in our studies. This indicates that the generic use of feminine-leaning nouns, especially when referring to people, was near nonexistent. Unlike their counterparts in *man, men,* or *boy*, feminine-leaning nouns were seldom used to refer to a non-specific group of individuals.

When making these connections, it also highlights some of the discrepancies in the data we received. *Journal of Basic Writing* and *TESOL Quarterly* did not have nearly as many usages of either *freshman* or the generic *man* (the two most prominent masculine-leaning nouns within our corpus study), which may explain why both journals start with much higher gender-neutral noun usage than the other journals. *Journal of Basic Writing* does have a spike in the usage of masculine-leaning nouns around 1990, but looking back at the data and the tallied nouns, that is likely due to a drop in the overall generic nouns used in those publications. The lack of sample size for those years led to any usage of a masculine-leaning noun to significantly alter the results for that year, as one instance of *man* accounts for a larger proportion of the terms tallied.

TESOL Quarterly is perhaps the journal that yielded the most interesting results. The data gathered about this journal shows a consistently high usage of gender-neutral nouns all the way from 1970 to present. Starting in 1970, the usage of gender-neutral nouns is 93% (with only one reference to *freshman*) and remains above 90% all the way to 2020. This is likely due to the relative infrequency of the word *freshman* in this journal compared to other journals within our study. *TESOL Quarterly* has only a fraction of *freshman* usage—never reaching above 10 marked nouns throughout our studies—therefore making the shift from *freshman* to *first-year* a less prominent event in the results of our data. Though there were still instances of both *freshman* and *first-year,* this journal notably did not focus on that particular subject as much as the other journals in our study.

Freshman and *freshmen* account for the vast majority of the generic masculine nouns in the corpus. Sometimes, the results of the specific issues pulled for our corpus study would have these words as their only masculine-leaning nouns. Because of this, journals like *TESOL Quarterly* and *Journal of Basic Writing*—both of which showed fewer references to first-year students in some of their published issues—began with significantly higher usage in gender-neutral nouns. The exception to this can be seen in the years of 1990 and 1995 in *Journal of Basic Writing,* which did include references to the *freshman* student, and subsequently, had a small spike in the usage of the masculine-leaning nouns. *Journal of Basic Writing* also contained fewer search terms in the years 1975 (64 tokens) and 2015 (63 tokens) because each year only had one published issue. Because of this, any individual masculine noun usage would make a larger difference in our percentage recording which may have directly impacted our results. Regardless, this journal (as well as *TESOL Quarterly*) appears to be an outlier in terms of gendered language and invites further research in the matter.

When looking at the general analysis of the data we gathered, the question arises of what the cause of these patterns could be. There seem to be two clear shifts within the data results, one around 1980 and the other around the 1990-2000 period. These both appear to have direct correlations to changes in the usage of certain search terms over time. In 1980, we see a significant reduction in the generic *man,* which had been somewhat more frequent in the early publications of *CCC* and *College English*. For example, between Fall 1975 and Fall 1980 in *CCC*, the usage of the generic *man* and *men* dropped from 19 total to a mere 6. This can also be seen in *College English* with 43 marked instances in 1970 and 63 in 1975 before plummeting to 5 in 1980. This journal shows the second most frequent usage of the generic *man,* which is largely due to those early years of publication (around 82% of its total usage over all the years of study was in 1970 and 1975 alone).[6]

Similarly, the shift we see from 1990-2000 matches the drop in usage of another masculine-leaning noun, *freshman*, which is then replaced with the gender-neutral *first-year student*. For most of the journals that do make this change from *freshman* to *first-year*, the jump to using more gender-neutral nouns align with the first instance of *first-year.* For instance, in *Composition Studies,* the first usage of the term *first-year* in place of *freshman* was noted in 1990, which is accompanied by a significant rise in the usage of gender-neutral nouns---from 61% in 1990 to 91% in 1995. This seems to suggest that the introduction of *first-year* brought about a significant decrease in the usage of masculine-leaning nouns and an increase in gender-neutral nouns. The pattern also aligns with the timing of the trends observed in Paterson (2020)'s study of British and American English corpora, suggesting that the journals follow general trends in gendered language.

This data shows a correlation between the fall of the generic masculine-leaning noun and the subsequent rise of the gender-neutral noun in its place. Although the usage of masculine-leaning nouns only ever surpassed the usage of gender-neutral nouns in early publications of *Composition Studies*, there is still a noticeable fall in the usage of the masculine-leaning noun seen in most of the journals we studied. Since language so often reflects societal standards, this study can offer an insight into the way our disciplinary language has—and how it is continuing to—evolve to fit our viewpoints on certain issues. By analyzing the steady rise of gender-neutral nouns in writing studies journals

over the past 50 years, we can observe shifts in what is and isn't acceptable when it comes to writing in the field. Though the journals we studied showed some variation, the patterns we observed seem to suggest an overall preference for gender-inclusive language, with some variation in line with broader language reform efforts.

Gender Bias in Epicene Pronouns

Table 3 shows the total epicene pronoun count found in each journal sub-corpus.

Table 3. Total Epicene Pronoun Count by Journal

	He	He or She	They
CCC	2	1	18
Composition Studies	0	0	5
Journal of Basic Writing	0	0	8
College English	6	0	5
TESOL Quarterly	2	0	4
WAC Journal	0	0	2
Total	**10**	**1**	**42**

Figures 8-13 present the diachronic distribution of each type of epicene pronoun (*he*, *he or she*, and *they*) in each journal across our study corpus. Due to the very small number of epicene pronouns found in the corpus and the fact that we are not making comparisons across journals, these results are presented as raw counts rather than percentages. the fact that we are not making comparisons across journals,[7] these results are presented as raw counts rather than percentages.
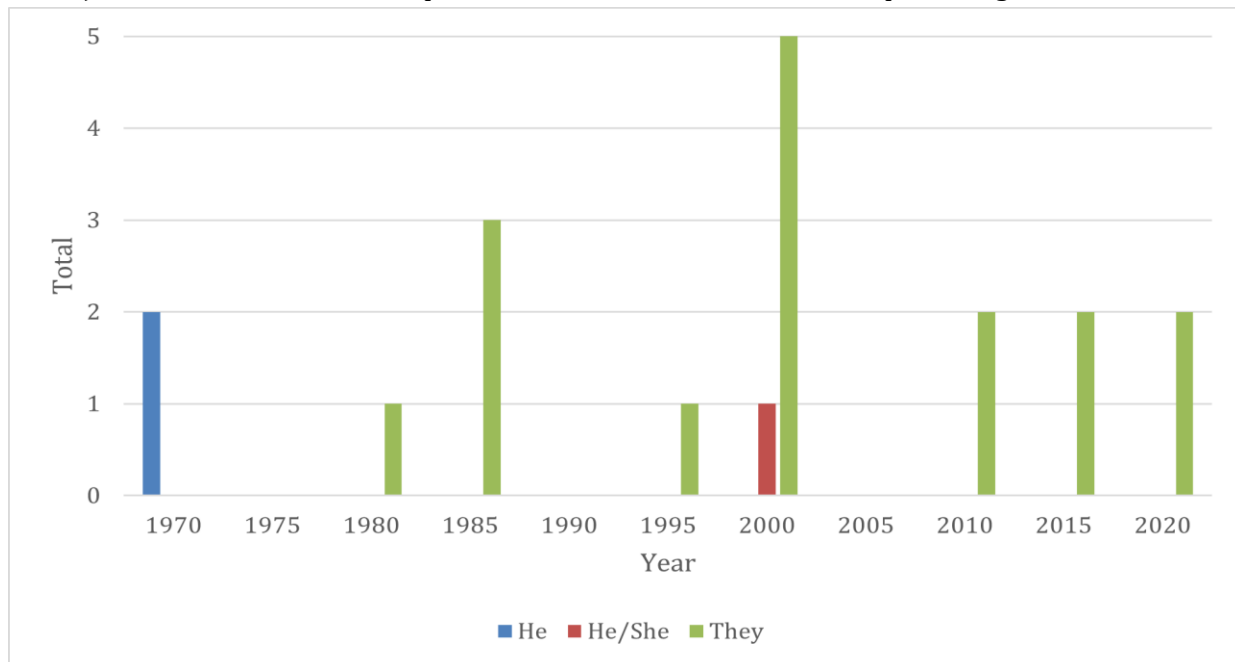

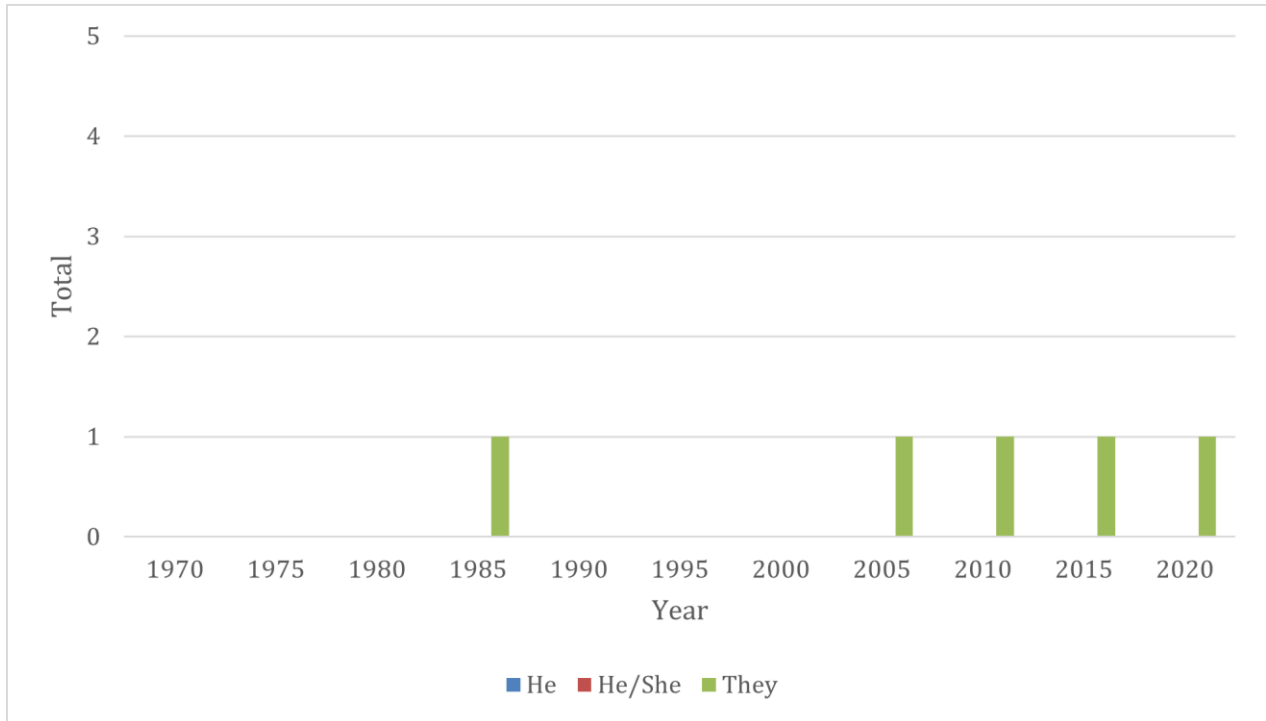*Figure 2: Epicene Pronouns in* CCC
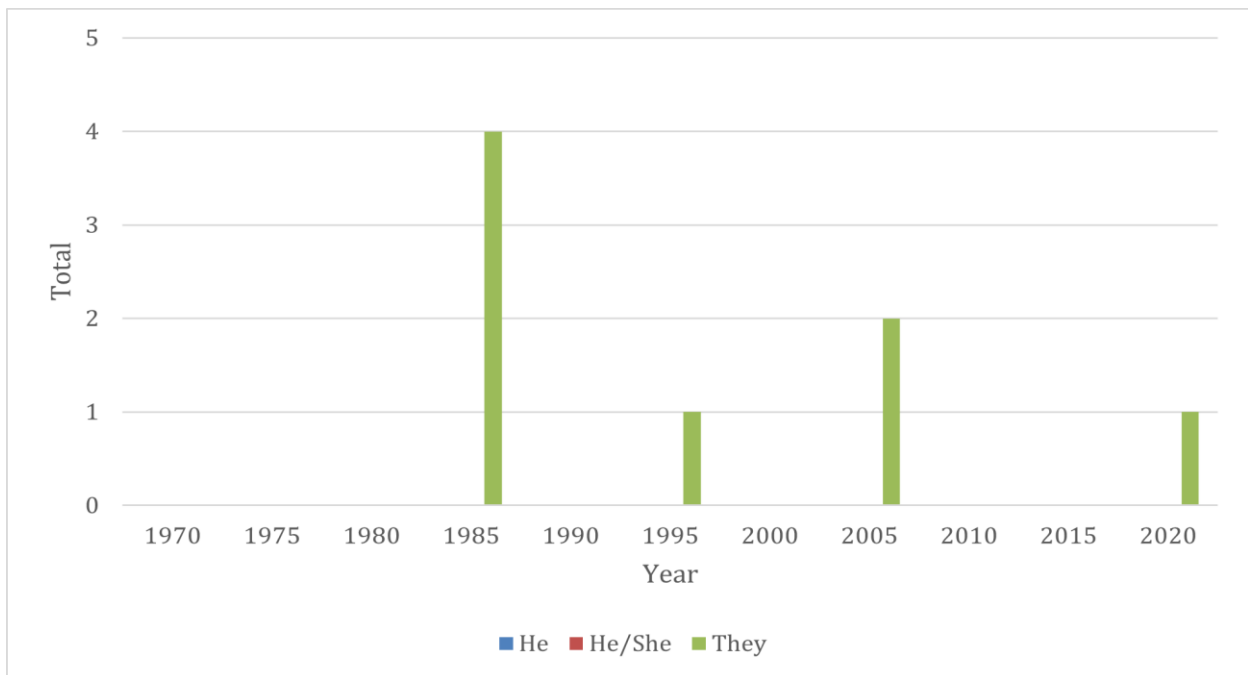
Figure 4: Epicene Pronouns in Composition Studies

Figure 30: Epicene Pronouns in Journal of Basic Writing
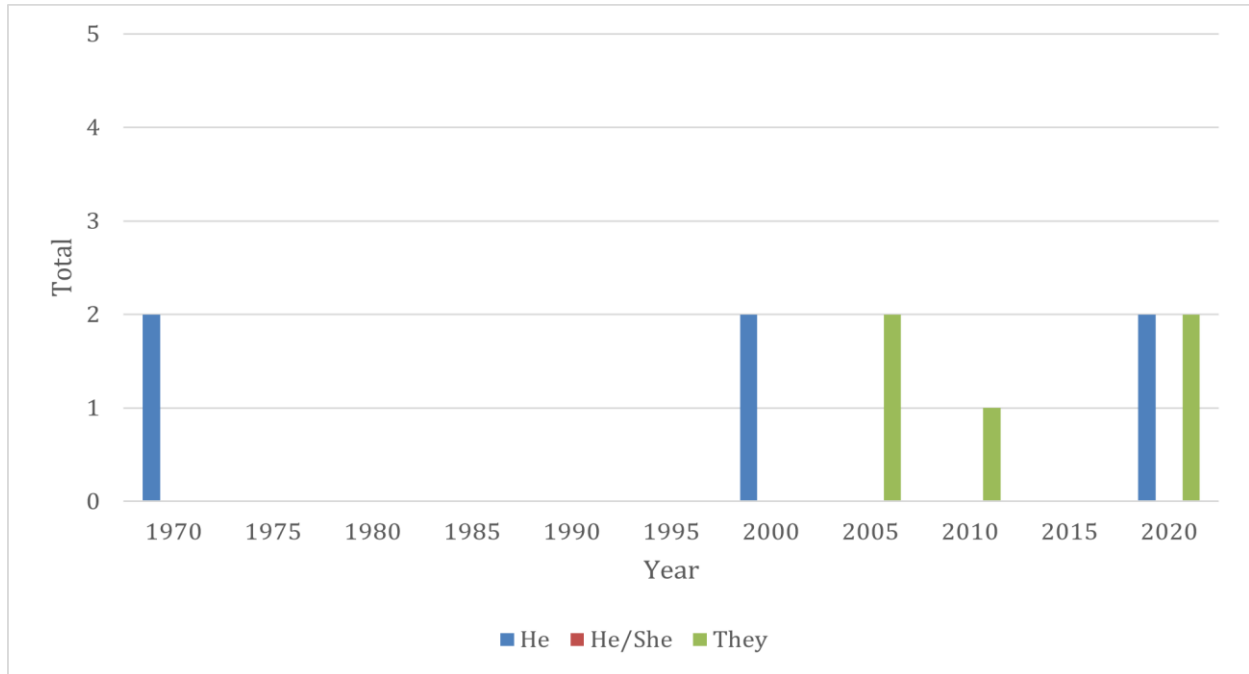
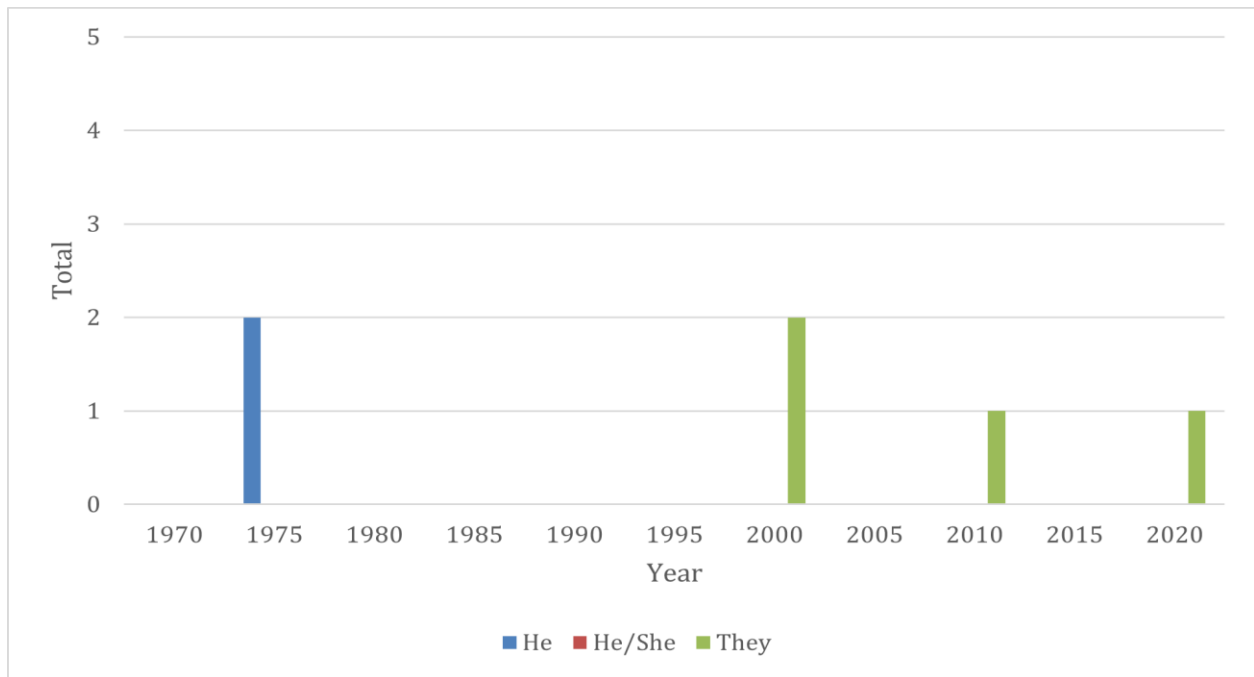*Figure 61: Epicene Pronouns in* College English

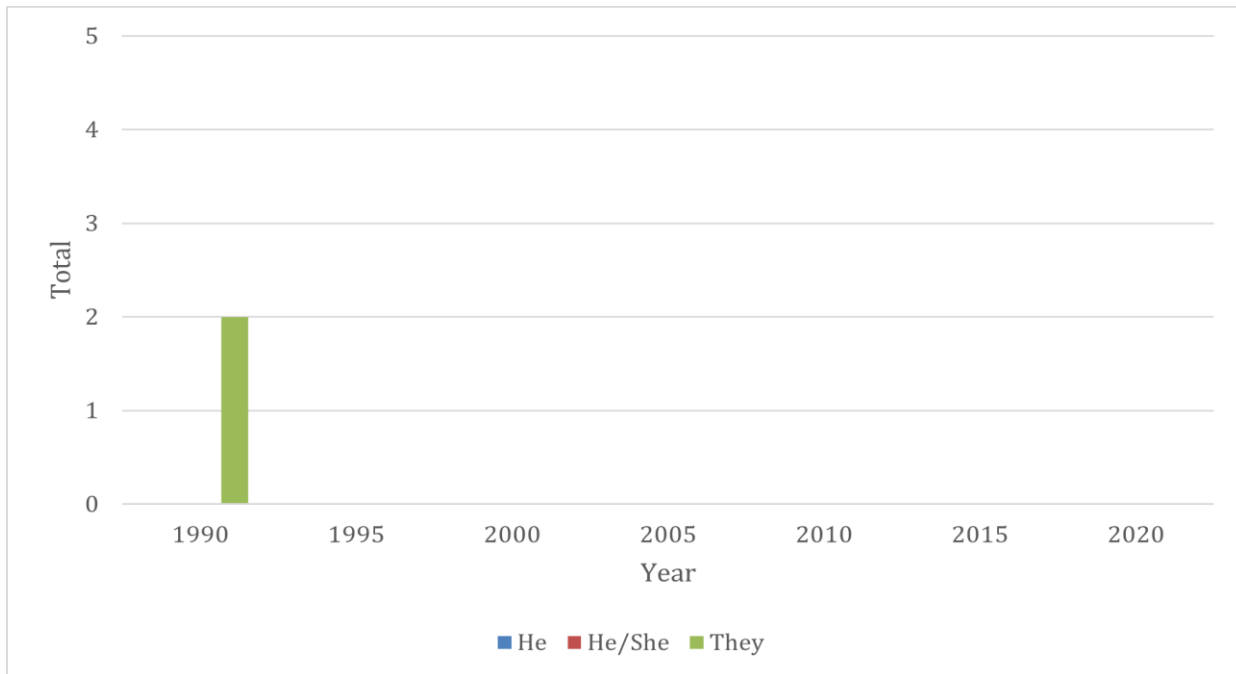*Figure 52: Epicene Pronouns in* TESOL Quarterly

Figure 7: Epicene Pronouns in WAC Journal

Our method of identifying epicene pronouns across the study corpus did not return enough results to draw any meaningful conclusions about the use of gendered versus gender-neutral epicene pronouns in writing studies journals. While *they* is most commonly used overall across all journals, there aren't enough occurrences of any pronoun to make any claims about their diachronic use. This is due to our methodology returning incomplete results. It is extremely unlikely, for instance, that *WAC Journal* only used two epicene pronouns with generic referents across its entire sub-corpus (and, as previously noted, attempting to replicate Stormbom's methodology initially returned more complete, but unwieldy results). Therefore, our conclusion regarding epicene pronouns is that they are nearly impossible to reliably identify in large corpora using the corpus linguistic software currently available, as every search result needs to be manually verified. However, recent advances in text mining software may soon make this much more manageable, as we will discuss in the following section.

Directions for Future Research

This research could be continued and expanded in a number of ways. As a start, our analysis focuses primarily on general shifts in patterns related to gendered language and comparisons between journals. Another investigative option would be to focus more narrowly on one or two journals, using corpus analysis in conjunction with other methodologies such as critical discourse analysis, tracking of themes across issues, an examination of changes in submission and formatting guidelines over time, and even interviews with current and former editors to explore how specific journals have adapted to changes in how we understand and discuss gender.

A limitation of this research in its current state is that there is, by necessity, a limited number of nouns we searched in our corpus. We picked around four or five for each noun type, but there are many other words that could be explored (*father/mother/parent*, *husband/wife/spouse,* etc.) and offer their own interesting insights. Similarly, expanding the analysis to other journals and even other disciplines can demonstrate how these fields have responded to changes in attitudes toward gender.

As discussed above, language can shape attitudes just as attitudes shape language, and this sort of thorough, empirical examination of how a discipline discusses gender can reveal broader patterns in how it views and treats people of all gender identities.

While our examination of epicene pronouns across the mini-corpus is exploratory and incomplete, research in text mining may soon make more thorough research into epicene pronouns easier. Nicos Isaak (2023) introduces a language model, PronounFlow, that is currently being trained to disambiguate pronouns. The model uses artificial intelligence to "filter [a sentence's] words based on parts of speech, match their pronouns with entities based on their gender to find any inconsistencies, and finally, replace any inconsistent pronouns with consistent ones returned by a language model" (p. 4). Because this process involves matching pronouns with their referents, a researcher can track epicene pronouns more efficiently than current corpus analysis software allows. Moreover, unlike previous language models, PronounFlow is trained to recognize gender-neutral pronouns, including *xe*, *ze*, and singular *they*. As artificial intelligence continues to advance, it's not unreasonable to imagine that language models could someday return a list of epicene pronouns with little intervention or verification from a researcher, enabling a wide array of diachronic studies of pronoun usage across genres, registers, and time periods.

Additionally, there is a need for more research into gendered language specifically in the context of trans, genderqueer, and nonconforming identities. For instance, because this study did not include referential pronouns or nouns, we did not include gender-neutral personal pronouns such as *xe* or *ze*. It is worth asking the question, then, of why these pronouns are not commonly used with generic referents (why we don't often say "A student should revise hir paper before ze submits it" unless referring to a specific student who uses those pronouns, while "A student should revise their paper before they submit it" sounds comparatively natural when used generically). Pronouns are typically considered a closed lexical class, meaning new forms do not often gain traction within a language. However, these neopronouns are becoming increasingly used in online spaces, though not everyone who adopts neopronouns online does so in their day-to-day life (King & Crowley, 2023). These pronouns are worth exploring in the context of writing studies' general shift toward more gender-neutral language. Though it is beyond the scope of the present article to generalize about the field's treatment of queer and trans issues,[8] more work needs to be done on the language we use in these conversations.

We see interesting potential in the largely unexplored confluences of historical linguistics with queer theory, trans rhetorics, and related disciplines. While diachronic corpus studies allow us to explore large linguistic trends, they do not paint the whole picture. GPat Patterson and Leland G. Spencer (2020) offer critical literature review as a methodology that "offer[s] readers a retrospective of where a field has been—highlighting its patterns and trends and illuminating its silences—while also forecasting opportunities for future work." Paraphrasing Hil Malatino in the same article, they note: "the inclusion industrial complex doesn't so much care how trans people are talked about, nor does it particularly care about the expertise (and lived experience) of the people writing and teaching about trans topics; it only matters that trans people are *talked about*" (emphasis in original). This points to a potential limitation of corpus studies: when not combined with other methods, they do not account for the substance of the text. While we can make claims about language, we cannot make claims about representation based solely on corpus data. Continuing to combine linguistic methods with qualitative methods like critical literature review, grounded theory, and queer theory can open up discussion between disciplines and give us a richer understanding of what we study. It is also crucial, of course, that we center the voices of queer, trans, and gender nonconforming scholars in discussions about gender.

Conclusion

Language has the power to both reflect and enforce social standards. It affects the way we think. Considered in the context of gender and identity, it becomes clear why the implementation of a more gender-inclusive language is important. This study demonstrates not only the evolution of language, but also the evolution of the discipline and of society over the previous 50 years. As language and society directly speak with one another (Bigler & Leaper, 2015, pp. 187-188), we see how societal views of gender and the gender binary affect language practices. While gender inequality remains a persistent issue, through corpus linguistic research, we have been able to track how the language used in writing studies journals reflects increasingly gender-neutral ideology.

Through this analysis, we see how writing studies reflects its stated values in its actual practice, allowing us insight into the scholarly community. While corpus analysis is not enough to make any broad, sweeping claims about the field's treatment of gender as a topic or about scholars within the community, it is an important data point that demonstrates how language functions to uphold our ideas about gender. Moreover, the methodological confluence between writing studies and language methodologies demonstrates the capacity of these fields to inform and enrich each other.

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Note

1 We use *writing studies* rather than *composition studies* deliberately to remain consistent with the title of the special issue and to more explicitly include writing genres, subfields, and practices that aren't always included under the label of *composition studies*, such as L2 writing (Matsuda, 2003; Zawacki and Cox, 2011) and creative writing (Emmerichs and Olson & Palmer, this volume). While time and space prevent us from exploring every available subfield, we view writing studies as expansive. As Victor Vitanza argues, "We are not a discipline. We are a meta-discipline. If we teach writing across the curriculum, doesn't that tell us . . . We inform all the other disciplines. They don't inform us" (Murphey et al. 1988, p. 31).

2 The phrase *he or she* can be represented in a variety of forms, including *he/she* and *(s)he*. Unless otherwise indicated, when we use one of these phrases, we refer to the epicene in all such forms.

3 This article focuses on the use of epicene pronouns to refer to hypothetical or generic referents. For detailed discussion on the history of and attitudes toward gender-neutral pronouns for specific individuals (including those who choose they/them as self-identifying pronouns), see Bradley et al. (2019) and Baron (2020).

4 We limited our analysis to research articles (excluding reviews, advertisements, editors' introductions, etc.), as these extraneous elements were inconsistent across journals. As Bethany Gray (2015) argues, research articles also provide better insight into acceptable language use in a discipline because they have undergone the process of peer review.

5 *She* was not found as an epicene pronoun in our corpus.

6 It is also worth noting that the journals under consideration use different formatting styles (MLA and APA), which differ in how they've historically responded to gendered language in their documentation guidelines (Grove, 2021). However, we would argue that these changes in documentation guidelines are also reflective of changes in broader disciplinary and societal understanding of gender.

7 Differences in the rates of occurrence of the various epicene pronouns across the journals may be partially attributed to the difference in each journal set's total word count. While we had initially planned to normalize the results so that frequencies could be compared across different sub-corpora (i.e., normalizing results to number of pronouns per 1000 words), we determined that was not necessary given the lack of data and subsequent decision not to compare pronoun use across journals.

8 For great examples of discussions of queer and trans issues in writing studies scholarship, see Alexander and Wallace (2009) and the 2020 special issue of *Peitho* on transgender rhetorics, co-edited by GPat Patterson and K.J. Rawson.

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