

Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man? Using Gender Differences to Create Convincing Characters

(The Cheat Sheet)

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Men and women may be *equal*, but they are *different*—and for a writer trying to create characters of the opposite sex, getting a handle on those differences is both important and difficult. We tend to create characters who think and talk like us. That's how female writers end up creating highly emotional men, and that's how male writers end up creating tough, gruff women.

First, a disclaimer: Gender differences are tendencies, not hard rules. Every human being falls along a spectrum between what society perceives as “masculine” and what society perceives as “feminine.” Where each person falls on the spectrum often reflects things like family of origin, ethnicity, age, education, and profession.

The challenge is in learning to step back from what WE would do to consider what THIS CHARACTER would do, to step back from what WE would say to consider what THIS CHARACTER would say.

Still, there are key differences between men and women. Being aware of those general differences will help you create believable (but not stereotypical) characters who think, talk, and act in gender-appropriate ways.

Creating Opposite-Sex Characters

A convincingly masculine character will:

- Be direct, issue-oriented and analytical.
- Act casual even in serious discussions.
- Interrupt, use short sentences, state his preferences clearly.
- Talk about concrete issues and verbalize only things that he sees as important.
- Be likely to give advice and to ask very specific questions.
- Probably choose to sit at angles from the person he's talking to.
- Be more interested in action than in talk.

A convincing masculine character will *not*:

- Ask lots of questions, ask leading questions, or turn statements into questions.
- Speak in euphemisms or use understatement.
- Downplay his ideas or let his sentences trail off without finishing.
- Make agreeing noises as he listens.
- Volunteer his reasons or information about his feelings.

Ask for help, especially with emotional issues.
Ask about others' feelings.
Hold eye contact for significant periods.
Say "I'm sorry" unless he really means it (and then he's apt to say "I apologize" instead).
Tell stories about his failings or use personal anecdotes to make a point, especially in a professional setting.
Get bogged down in introspection or self-doubt.
Ask for validation from other people.

A convincing feminine character will:

Ask questions of all kinds.
Try to bring the group to consensus and agreement.
Be indirect about stating her wishes, making suggestions instead of statements.
Sit directly across from the person she's talking to and hold eye contact for long periods of time.
Use personal anecdotes to make her point and will use self-deprecating humor.
Be critical of her own appearance (at least to herself).
Interrupt in order to make agreeing noises or to avert conflict.
Express emotion easily, except for anger.
Talk about her relationships easily and at length, even with relative strangers.
Note and interpret the facial expressions and body language of others.

A convincing feminine character will not:

Rush to give advice to others.
Make lots of firm statements or say she knows something if she really doesn't.
Move directly from problem to action without full consideration of the possibilities.
Sit in a sprawling position when in mixed company.
Boast or to tell stories that make her look good.
Switch from shy to brash without reason.
Seek out confrontation.
Interrupt in order to give her opinion.

For further information:

Writing Between the Sexes, by Leigh Michaels.
Writing from 9 to 5, by Deborah Tannen.
You Just Don't Understand, by Deborah Tannen.
Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, by John Gray.