

Gender-Inclusive / Non-Sexist Language Guidelines and Resources

Advice for Classrooms and Other Spaces

Have you ever been called by a name or gender that you don't identify with? Misgendering someone is disrespectful and dismissive. One way to misgender is to assume you know someone's gender via their appearance and to call them a name or pronoun that they don't identify with. Misgendering can also occur when you teach as if your entire class is male. The best practice is to use words daily with intention and care.

To avoid unintentionally creating a sexist and homophobic classroom environment, during discussions do not limit yourself to male examples or heterosexual examples. Teachers can and should honor the breadth of experience and potential in students' lives by discussing women, gender non-conforming, and LGBT-identified people. For example, avoid giving examples that assume that all doctors are men.

The first day of class can be stressful for both teachers and students. Rather than beginning class by calling roll and potentially addressing a student by a name or pronoun that they do not use, here are some strategies for being inclusive on the first day: 1) Ask students to introduce themselves or 2) Ask students to write down preferred names and pronouns.

Keep in mind that the University of Pittsburgh provides an option for students to provide their Preferred Name in Courseweb and on 28 pages in PeopleSoft. The Preferred Name will only display on these 28 pages if a student has taken steps to add a Preferred Name. In this way, students can and should be proactive about making changes. However, faculty and staff should be cognizant that they might see a discrepancy between names throughout University systems.

Below are links to additional information:

Preferred Name Announcement - [http://www.registrar.pitt.edu/assets/pdf/Preferred Name Announcement - Visibility Increased in PeopleSoft.pdf](http://www.registrar.pitt.edu/assets/pdf/Preferred%20Name%20Announcement%20-%20Visibility%20Increased%20in%20PeopleSoft.pdf)
PeopleSoft Preferred Name Page List - [http://www.registrar.pitt.edu/assets/pdf/PeopleSoft Preferred Name Page List.pdf](http://www.registrar.pitt.edu/assets/pdf/PeopleSoft%20Preferred%20Name%20Page%20List.pdf)

Here are a few strategies to keep in mind when meeting regularly with a group of people for a class or event: If you are not sure what name or pronoun someone uses, ask! Respect a person's identity by calling them by the name and pronouns that they use. Keep in mind that a person's gender identity may change over time. Be open to changes in gender pronouns.

You may slip up and use the wrong gender pronoun when referring to another person. This is okay. However, don't pretend you didn't use the incorrect pronoun. If you make a mistake, take accountability for your error by correcting yourself before continuing your conversation. Everyone in the space will appreciate your effort.

We hope to foster a culture of inclusivity throughout the University of Pittsburgh. The best way to keep up with all of this information is to stay educated. Check out some of the resources below if you have questions or want to learn more.

TOOLS FOR WRITING

Terms to Use to Avoid Sexist Language

Language to Use	Language Not to Use
humankind	mankind
chair or chairperson	chairman
first year student	freshman
firefighter	fireman
flight attendant	stewardess
police officer	policeman
congressperson	congressman

How to Use Gender-Inclusive Pronouns for Third Person Singular

subject	object	possessive adjective	possessive pronoun	reflexive
they	them	their	theirs	themselves
ze/zie	zim	zir	zirs	zirsself

Example Sentences:

they (subject):

They love coffee!

ze (subject):

Ze loves coffee!

them (object):

I asked them to meet me in the library.

zim (object):

I asked zim to meet me in the library.

their (possessive adjective):

I read their book in my composition class.

zir (possessive adjective):

I read zir book in my composition class.

themselves (reflexive):

They taught themselves to play the guitar.

zirsself (reflexive):

Ze taught zirsself to play the guitar.

When writing and speaking, a good rule to keep in mind is to *be consistent, intentional, and respectful* when making language decisions. If you are writing about someone you do or don't know (just as when you are talking to someone), use the same language that the person uses when naming or identifying themselves.

SEX, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY:¹

Definitions and Key Things to Know

Sex [sex category]:

The category “sex” typically organizes people by their bodies through five elements: reproductive organs, sexual organs, chromosomes, gonads, and hormones. Currently, the first two traits (sexual and reproductive organs) dominate sex assignment. Possible sex assignments include male, female, and intersex.

KEY THINGS TO KNOW:

-The sex binary assumes that all bodies are easily assigned to one of two sex categories, male or female, even when sex asymmetries are present (for example, an individual with male chromosomes and female sexual organs). Cultural norms determine which physical characteristics are fundamental to legal sex category assignment.

-Sex assignment gives us a legal sex. Some (but certainly not all) trans people want the right to change their legal sex to affirm their gender identity and/or for legal rights and protections. Laws and legal processes for the regulation of sex category vary state by state.

Gender [gender identity or gender expression]:

Gender refers to individual and cultural understandings of behaviors, roles, feelings, and activities. Unlike sex category, biological factors *do not* determine gender. However, our current sex/gender system links sex to gender through the naturalization and enforcement of gender conventions and norms. The conflation of sex and gender identifies masculinity and femininity as the “natural” and “normal” gender expressions for people assigned male and female respectively. Certainly this is an accurate way to explain how some people experience gender, but it does not accurately reflect all of our experiences.

Some genders include masculine, feminine, genderqueer (queer, fluid, or non-binary gender identity), agender (neutral or non-existent gender identity and/or expression), cisgender (gender identity and/or expression that is “cis,” or “on the same side as,” assigned sex category), and transgender (any gender identity or expression that differs from sex assignment). Trans refers to a range of non-cisgender identities, including transgender and transsexual.

KEY THINGS TO KNOW:

-Gender does not refer to sex category and gender is not the *natural* result of sex. Recognizing “sex” and “gender” as discrete categories allows us to affirm all gender expressions irrespective of assigned sex.

¹ Authored by Julie Beaulieu, English & GSWS Visiting Lecturer, University of Pittsburgh

-Trans people, like cisgender people, should be given the right to privacy. Inquiries about *anyone's* genitals (outside of intimate or medical spaces) are serious invasions of privacy and might count as harassment.

-You can ask people how they identify if you are unsure of how to address them. Similarly, if you are unsure of what pronouns to use, just ask.

Sexuality [sexual orientation or sexual identity]:

Sexuality encompasses both romantic and physical desires and attractions. Some sexual identities specify romantic and/or sexual object choice (heterosexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian), while others express romantic and/or sexual desires or acts as they relate to dominant understandings of sex. For example, “queer” refers to romantic and/or sexual identities or acts that differ from existing norms; “pansexual” expresses romantic and/or sexual desires that are not influenced or determined by sex or gender; “asexual” defines people with [neutral or] non-existent sexual desires and/or attractions.

KEY THINGS TO KNOW:

-Cultural norms shape hierarchies of sexual acts and desires. Numerous binaries exist to buttress the idea that there are right and wrong ways to desire (for example, natural vs. unnatural, reproductive vs. nonreproductive, moral vs. immoral, coupled vs. uncoupled, and romantic vs. recreational). Hierarchies and binaries that demarcate acceptable and unacceptable sexualities foster discrimination and violence.

-The sex-positive movement advocates for the acceptance of all sex acts and sexualities that are both safe and consensual. Sex positive politics focus on decreasing stigma while increasing attention to public safety and public health. Decreased stigma—which permits more open sex education—benefits public health.

-Advocating for sex positivity should not lead to the assumption that everyone *should* have sex.

Join the conversation! Pitt's Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program hosts numerous events each year. Check out our calendar via the GSWS homepage!

<http://www.gswstudies.pitt.edu>

Answers to Objections Made About Gender- Inclusive / Non-Sexist Language²

It's not correct. 1. Correct is a social and ideological construction that only began to become conceivable, especially for English, in the 17th century. Correctness is arguably a social evaluation mechanism to know who has learned the language of a particular group (class, race, etc.). 2. Language is always changing. This is probably the only true universal of human language.

It interferes with the natural course of language. Actually, English has been losing gender marking for centuries. (Note that this is actually in opposition to the first point.) In addition, using plural for singular generic is actually the way it was before grammarians introduced the idea to make the masculine pronoun

Lack of agreement doesn't make sense (for their/them/they singular). Neither does marking gender when it doesn't describe the person described. But it is a common strategy for languages, and doesn't generally lead to confusion. Also, by this argument we should bring back singular thou/thee/thine!

People will not adopt new usages, such shifts need to be 'organic.' That's been claimed about lots of proposed language planning efforts. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, and we do a little bit about what leads to success (there's a subfield of linguistics/sociology called Language Policy and Planning devoted to it). One thing we do know is that the more institutional (especially education and media) support such proposals have, the more people come to accept them. My students are often surprised to find that Ms is a relatively new address form for women, and also find reading anything using the generic masculine pronoun to be jarring. This objection was used at the time Ms was introduced and guidelines against the generic masculine began to be produced.

We should wait until social mores/ideas/ideologies catch up before changing the language to reflect that reality. When exactly is that, and how do we know the time has arrived? More forcefully, language is a social practice, and there is a mutually informing and reinforcing relationship between language and thought/ideology. Changing the language is part of making the world a more equitable place for people who don't feel they fit into the gender binary.

It's an imposition on free speech/it's just political correctness/you can't tell me how to talk. No one is ordering you to use this language. However, some people are asking you to be considerate of their wishes and sensibilities. In short, it's merely politeness -- politeness is about consideration for other people. You are free to not use this language (it is merely a suggestion for those who would like to know how people would like to handle such things). You are also free to criticize the way someone is dressed even if you don't know them, but then most people would probably think you are rude. Isn't it nice to have a little guidance about how to be considerate and polite?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

² Authored by Scott F. Kiesling, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Pittsburgh

Non-Sexist Language Standards

American Anthropological Association:

http://www.aaanet.org/publications/style_guide.pdf

Chicago Manual of Style:

<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

Gender-Inclusive Language Standards

Gender Pronouns Guide, University of Wisconsin-Madison LGBT Campus Center:

http://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/LGBTCC-Gender_pronoun_guide.pdf

GLAAD Media Reference Guide: <http://www.glaad.org/reference>

Using Gender-Neutral Language in Academic Writing, Warren Wilson College:

http://inside.warren-wilson.edu/~writingcenter/Gender-Neutral_Language.pdf

Trans@MIT: Allies Toolkit: <http://web.mit.edu/trans/TGterminology.pdf>

Trans* Educational Resources, Vanderbilt University: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/transvu/trans-educational-resources>

FURTHER READING

Ten Things You're Actually Saying When You Ignore Someone's Gender Pronouns:

<http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/10/ignore-gender-pronouns/>