

# LET'S GET IT RIGHT: USING CORRECT PRONOUNS AND NAMES

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## Gender, Pronouns and Names

We use people's pronouns and names frequently and in regular, every day communication, both verbally and in writing. We do it almost without thinking. Because names and pronouns are the two ways people call and refer to others, they are personal and important. They are also key facets of our identity. Therefore, calling someone by the wrong name or "misgendering" them by using incorrect pronouns or names can feel disrespectful, harmful and even unsafe.

From an early age, many were taught that pronouns should follow specific rules along the gender binary: "she, her and hers" for girls and women and "he, him and his" for boys and men. However, as our society has progressed in understanding gender identity, our language must also be updated. It should be accurate and convey understanding and respect for all people, especially for those who are transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary.

Because some people identify themselves outside the gender binary (gender binary is the idea that gender consists of two distinct, opposite and disconnected categories—male and female), it is important to make sure you know the specific pronouns people use, whether they use female, male or gender-neutral pronouns. Be mindful that the pronouns "he" and "she" come with a set of expectations and gender norms about how people express their identity. For many, these terms are limiting and confining so gender-neutral options are preferable.

If you use the wrong pronoun or name, people may not correct you because they may feel awkward, uncomfortable or unsafe. If you don't know what people's pronouns and names are, you can listen to how they or others refer to them, or you can ask. There are suggestions below about how to do this in a school or classroom setting.

There has been a much-needed movement away from asking and identifying pronouns as "preferred." For example, people used to ask, "What is your preferred pronoun?" This question is problematic because a person's pronouns are not just "preferred"—they are the pronouns that should be used.

## Strategies for Supporting Young People

Using correct names and pronouns shows respect, acceptance and support to all students, especially those who are transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary. While some schools and school districts have specific [policies](#) on a range of issues regarding transgender and gender non-conforming students, below are practical tips and strategies for showing respect to students.

### Student Interest Survey

At the beginning of the school year or new semester, many teachers distribute a "get to know you survey" to learn more about their students: how they best learn, their hobbies/interests outside of school, what they did over the summer, etc. You can add a question about pronouns such as: "What are your gender

pronouns?" or "Which pronouns do you use?" You can also ask what name they use. This sends a message that you want to know their accurate name and pronouns and it gives you the information you need to get it right. You should also ask whether it's okay or not to use their name and pronoun in communication home to parents/family members and in parent-teacher conferences. Keep in mind that some students may not disclose this information to some or all family members.

### **Model Inclusivity**

If you know students' correct pronouns and names, use them in class and do not rely on "official" or roster information. You can act as a role model by sharing your pronouns and using them when introducing yourself. Be careful not to make assumptions about someone's pronouns and name and at the same time, be sensitive to students who may not feel ready or comfortable to disclose this information. If you make a mistake in using the wrong name or pronoun, quickly self-correct and move on. Similarly, if another student or adult uses an incorrect name or pronoun, make the correction and continue the conversation. Don't dwell unnecessarily on it, which could inadvertently make the student feel more uneasy.

### **One-on-one Conversations with Students**

If you do not address names/pronouns in a survey or another way, students may talk with you individually after class about their name or pronoun. Listen to what they say without judgment, ask clarifying questions and let them know you will correctly use their name or pronoun. As stated above, the best way to ask is: "What are your gender pronouns?" or "Which pronouns do you use?" Be mindful that some students may not disclose this information at home so it's helpful if you sensitively ask whether their name and/or pronoun should also be used in communication home to family members.

### **Discussion Starters**

There are a few ways to start a discussion about the use of pronouns. Always be mindful not to single anyone out and don't engage in a class discussion if you feel it would increase the discomfort, rather than minimize it.

One way is to have students read an article about the history of the pronoun "they" such as [A Brief History of Singular "They"](#) or [Even the staunchest grammarians are now accepting the singular, gender-neutral "they."](#) Or you can have students read something like [Here's Why Gender Pronouns Are So Important](#). There are also short videos that can serve as conversation starters about pronouns such as [Why Gender Pronouns Matter](#) or [Why Pronouns Matter For Trans People](#). After you read or watch, ask open-end discussion questions like: What are your thoughts and feelings about what you read/watched? What did you learn that you didn't know before? How are you thinking differently about this now? You could also assign a reflective writing assignment or a "quick write" to have students express their thoughts.

### **Confidentiality**

Always be aware that while students may share their pronouns and name with you, this doesn't mean they have shared it with other teachers, students, friends or family members. If you have the opportunity, ask students whether their pronouns and name should be used in communication home to parents or not. And don't share this information without express permission from the students themselves.

## List of Pronouns

Below is a list of pronouns. This is not a comprehensive list and other pronouns, or no pronouns at all, might be preferred by some transgender people. The correct pronouns for a person do not necessarily align with the associated gender identity or expression. Be mindful that cisgender as well as transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary people may use feminine, masculine or gender-neutral pronouns.

*Feminine: She, her, hers*

*Masculine: He, him, his*

*Gender Neutral: They\*, them, their*

\*Many dictionaries have recognized “they” as a singular pronoun for years, including *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* and [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com).

### Related ADL Resources:

[Beyond the Binary: Discussing Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity in K-12 Schools](#)

[Terminology Related to Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity](#)

[Transgender Identity and Issues](#) (HS lesson plan)