

Using Gender Inclusive Language in the Classroom

What happens in the classroom has a lasting impression on students' perceptions of and experiences at the university. From course content to class discussions and office hours appointments – these components add to the greater whole of a student's time at Oregon State University. As an instructor, you have the opportunity to cultivate inclusive classrooms that positively impact students' academic experiences and career goals.

While there are many components of inclusive classrooms, respecting students' names and pronouns is key. Pronouns, and more specifically, gender pronouns often represent a person's gender expression. The pronouns are she/her, he/him, and they/them pronouns, but there are many other pronouns that people use.

Check out the chart below for some of the pronouns:

Pronouns

This is a non-exhaustive list of pronouns. It often requires practice to use some of them with ease.

She/her/hers

He/him/his

They/them/theirs

Ae/aer/aers

Fae/faer/faers

Ve/ver/vers

Xe/xem/xyrs

Ze/zir/zirs

Pronouns have gendered connotations in English (e.g., “she” to refer to a girl/woman; “he” to refer to a man/boy). Even though people of all genders use she/her and he/him pronouns, typically people assume a person's pronouns based on their own perceptions of that person's external appearance. Assuming a student's pronouns may lead to using the incorrect pronoun, also known as *misgendering*.

As one of the most cited negative experiences in higher education, misgendering has mental health consequences including increased depression, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem. In fact, many trans and gender diverse individuals avoid places where they are misgendered, and this includes the university classroom.

Respecting pronouns and using gender-inclusive language can help students feel like they belong in the classroom and be fully present in their academic experience.

So, how do you know what pronouns to use for students? What happens when someone makes a mistake? Check out this video on pronouns:

What is gender inclusive language?

Gender inclusive language avoids exclusion of and bias against people of all genders.

Using gender inclusive language is a way to avoid exclusion and bias against people based on gender.

Many terms, phrases, and sayings are inherently tied to gender (e.g., “Welcome ladies and gentlemen!”). While this language is common and widely used, it does not include people of all genders. Here are some suggestions to avoid gender-specific language in your classroom.

Gender Inclusive Terminology in the Classroom

Avoid saying	Consider saying	Example	<i>Why?</i>
Born female, born male Biological woman, biological man	Assigned female at birth (AFAB) Assigned male at birth (AMAB)	“I was assigned female at birth”	Assigned is an appropriate description of the sex assignment process.
Male-bodied Female-bodied	See above	See above	“-bodied” language is often interpreted as pressure to medically transition, or to invalidate one’s gender. There is no such thing as a male body and a female body – it’s too complex!



Avoid saying	Consider saying	Example	Why?
Both genders, opposite sex	All genders, all sexes	"Students of all genders and sexes attend OSU"	There are more than two genders and sexes. "Both" and "opposite" suggest two options. Opposite suggests a binary, even though there are more sexes than two
"Ladies and gentlemen" "Boys and girls" "Guys"	Everyone, y'all, all, folks, everybody, honored guests, children, kids, youth	"Good morning, everyone!"	Moving away from binary, gender specific language is more inclusive of trans people
Pregnant women	Pregnant women and people, pregnant people	"I believe that pregnant people should have complete bodily autonomy"	People of all genders can become pregnant – this shift is language is more accurate of the population of pregnant people

Pronoun and Gender Inclusive Language Resources:

- [Mypronouns.org](https://mypronouns.org): A website with information about what pronouns are, why they matter, how to use various pronouns, what to do when mistakes happen, how to share your pronouns and ask others for their pronouns, and other gender inclusive language/strategies.
- [Oregon State University Pride Center](https://pridecenter.osu.edu): The Pride Center provides programs and support services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual members of the on-campus and online OSU community and their allies (LGBTQQIAA).

Reading and Research:

Doyle, D. M., Begeny, C. T., Barreto, M., & Morton, T. A. (2021). Identity-related factors protect well-being against stigma for transgender and gender non-conforming people. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(7), 3191–3200. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02029-1>

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2014.950691>
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- Santos, T. C., Mann, E. S., & Pfeffer, C. A. (2021). Are university health services meeting the needs of transgender college students? A qualitative assessment of a public university. *Journal of American College Health, 69*(1), 59–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1652181>