

Gender Diversity and Pronouns

Overview	<p>The following content and linked resources have been curated as a primer for instructors to better meet the needs of transgender and non-binary students. This resource is broken into three sections:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Why Pronouns Matter 2) Making Mistakes 3) Making Your Classroom More Inclusive of Trans Students <p>Potentially unfamiliar vocabulary is in bold text.</p>
Goals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To explain why respecting your students' gender identities matters. 2) To familiarize instructors with trans-inclusive language and appropriate comportment to model for their students. 3) To assist instructors in creating a safe and inclusive environment for transgender students. 4) To provide concrete resources for instructors to implement in their course and syllabus design.
Implementation	<p>These resources are best reviewed before the planning phase of course design, so the instructor has ample time to consider how they will implement trans inclusive pedagogy in addition to working through any discomfort they may have in advance. Some of the resources can be used as content in class.</p>
Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Because we have grown up learning to gender people based on internalized visual and cultural norms, it takes a great deal of intentional practice to stop relying on norms in the ways we gender the people we encounter. You will make mistakes along the way, but you will make fewer mistakes with practice. 2) While mistakes are a normal part of the process, those mistakes can still cause harm. Spend time thinking through how to respond when you make mistakes that will best limit the harm to misgendered students. 3) It is common to get defensive when we are asked to change the way we speak, act, or think, especially when it is something as foundational to our worldview and self-view as gender often is. Give yourself space to process those feelings without letting your initial reaction impact the way you treat trans students.

Section 1: Why Pronouns Matter

Because gender is so deeply woven into our upbringing and socialization, it is one of the most internally difficult aspects of our worldview to challenge. And because **gendering** (the social assignment or designation of a person's gender, usually on the basis of perceived sex) is often a key aspect of our interactions—from the use of pronouns to the social scripts we've internalized—the way we think about gender is constantly on display through our words and actions. This leaves people we encounter susceptible to our perspectives on gender.

People who are **cisgender** (meaning, people who were assigned a sex and gender at birth that is in agreement with their self-designated gender) have the privilege of having their gender affirmed through the normative ways people address them, such as through gendered pronouns, honorifics (Ms., Mr., sir, ma'am), and other gendered words applied to them (woman, man, wife, husband, etc.). When cisgender people are **misgendered** (meaning, they are referred to in a way that does not affirm their self-designated gender), it is an anomaly, and any offense they take at being misgendered is validated.

People who are **transgender** (meaning, people who were assigned a sex and gender at birth that is *not* in agreement with their self-designated gender) frequently experience having their gender negated through misgendering. And any offense they take at being misgendered is often invalidated, dismissed, mocked, or even responded to violently. The routine invalidation of trans people through misgendering contributes to a culture that punishes and dehumanizes transgender people for existing.

With the prevalence of anti-trans violence and homicide, it is imperative that we all commit to humanizing and validating the genders of trans people. As instructors, we have a further responsibility to create a space in which our students feel safe, valued, and respected, as these are crucial conditions for engaged learning. A good starting place is to commit to using appropriate pronouns inside and outside of the classroom. Push yourself to not make assumptions about which pronouns a person uses. Instead, create conditions for students to share their pronouns at the beginning of the semester.

While there are many pronouns a person may choose to go by (and all should be diligently used when a student designates them as their pronouns, regardless of your familiarity with them), the **most common pronouns** you are likely to encounter are:

He/his (singular, usually masculine specific)

She/hers (singular, usually feminine specific)

They/them (singular, the most common gender nonspecific pronouns)

Ze/hir (singular, gender nonspecific pronouns)

Further Viewing and Reading on Pronouns

[“Why Pronouns Matter”](#) video and transcript

[“Pronoun Etiquette”](#) by Dean Spade

[“Designated Pronouns”](#) Spectrum Center, University of Michigan

[“What to do \(and not do\) when someone asks for different gender pronouns”](#) a comic by Robot Hugs

Section 2: Making Mistakes

Avoiding misgendering entirely is of course preferable, but even with the best intentions, we sometimes mess up. Until you become practiced at using pronouns that are dissonant with your assumptions about a person's gender, you are likely to make mistakes, and how you respond to them is important. In the moment we make a mistake, we might become embarrassed, defensive, dismissive, or even angry. Those feelings are normal but can cause more harm than the initial mistake if we react to them.

When you make a mistake and misgender someone, you should do four things:

- 1) **Apologize.** A simple, "I'm sorry" will do. This is not a good time to express your embarrassment or explain why you misgendered them. Simply saying "I'm sorry" acknowledges that you recognize you made an error, and you regret any harm your error might have caused.
- 2) **Correct yourself.** Again, keep it brief. If you used "she" to refer to a student who has designated "he" as his pronoun, simply say, "I meant 'he,'" and move on.
- 3) **Do better.** Students are likely to understand that mistakes are human, and the habits of deeply engrained gendered language are difficult to unlearn. But if you repeatedly misgender your students, it appears to them that you do not respect them enough to put in the necessary effort.
- 4) **Center their feelings.** If the person you misgendered seems noticeably upset, follow-up with them in private. Again, this is not a chance for you to be defensive or focus on your guilt or how hard this is for you. Nor is it appropriate to ask the student to explain why your mistake upset them. You want to avoid putting the student in a position in which they have to prioritize your feelings and needs over their own. Make your follow-up about their needs and how you can best support them.

When you respond to your mistakes this way, you help restore trust and safety for your trans students, and you affirm their gender, even in light of your mistake, by acknowledging that your mistake was a mistake.

When a student makes a mistake and misgenders someone, correct them. If it happens more than once, speak to them privately about their mistake and explain why it is important that they respect the designated pronouns of their peers

Further Reading on Pronouns

["Etiquette about accidentally misgendering trans people"](#) Things of Things

Section 3: Making Your Classroom More Inclusive of Trans Students

In addition to using the correct pronouns for your students, there are several ways you can make your classroom a more inclusive space for transgender students:

- 1) **Give students the opportunity to tell you the name and pronouns they want to be used in the classroom before you call attendance or use a pronoun for them in class.** While the University of Michigan allows students to [designate pronouns on Wolverine Access](#), do not assume that all students have registered their pronouns through the University.
 - a. **Have students fill out a “getting to know you” form on the first day or over email before the first day of class.** The form can include a line to indicate the name on record with the university, the name they want you and their peers to use with them, and the pronouns they designate for use by the people in this class. Make clear that you will take attendance with this form, so students can be sure that you recognize any name discrepancies without them having to indicate those discrepancies out loud.
 - b. **Introduce yourself with your pronouns.** (ex: “My name is Alex, and I use he/his pronouns”), and then have students do the same. This normalizes the practice of introducing oneself with pronouns, instead of making it something only transgender students have to do. It also sets up an expectation that everyone in the class should commit to using the pronouns each student designates for themselves.
 - c. **Have students make nametags or name tents that include their pronouns.** This can help build cognitive links between the student, their name, and their pronouns.
 - d. **If using web-conferencing for an online course, have students add their pronouns to their names.**
- 2) **Include trans issues and content by trans people in your course.** Many course topics can have a significant impact on trans people. Including trans voices and issues in your syllabus demonstrates a valuation of the experiences and contributions of trans people.
- 3) **Make your course policies and language trans-inclusive in your syllabus.**
 - a. **Consider including specific ground rules about respecting designated pronouns and other gendered language.**
 - b. **Include resources that will be helpful for transgender students in the resources section of your syllabus,** such as:
 - i. The location of the nearest gender-inclusive restrooms, and a link to the gender inclusive restroom map: [“Gender Inclusive Restrooms at the University of Michigan”](#)
 - ii. [Instructions on how to change designated pronouns with Wolverine Access](#)
 - iii. [Gender Inclusive Housing interest form](#)
 - iv. [A link to the Spectrum Center](#) (University of Michigan’s LGBTQ resource and support center) website

Additional Resources for Trans-Inclusive Classrooms

[“Making Classrooms Welcoming for Trans Students”](#)

[“Fostering Trans Inclusion in the Classroom”](#) by Stacy Jane Grover