

**Gender-Inclusive / Non-Sexist Language Guidelines and Resources**  
**From GSWS Program at the University of Pittsburgh**

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. 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.

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.

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: 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.

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

### Example Syllabi Statements

From GSWS Program at the University of Pittsburgh  
(<http://gsws.pitt.edu/faculty/gender-inclusivenon-sexist-language-syllabi-statement>)

Gender-Inclusive/Non-Sexist Language Syllabi Statement

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, The University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/non-sexist language. Following these guidelines fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices.

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Just as sexist language excludes women's experiences, non-gender-inclusive language excludes the experiences of individuals whose identities may not fit the gender binary, and/or who may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Identities including trans, intersex, and genderqueer reflect personal descriptions, expressions, and experiences. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (for example, first year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind, etc.). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students, faculty, and staff may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

These guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: <https://www.cfo.pitt.edu/policies/policy/07/07-01-03.html>. For additional information please visit the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program: <http://www.gswstudies.pitt.edu/>

From Washington University (<http://safezones.wustl.edu/faculty>)

(Modified examples from "Preventing and Dealing with Homophobia in the Classroom,"  
Renee Weels, University of Alabama)

Safe Educational Environment Policy

This course involves lecture, discussion and collaborative problem solving. This means that all of us will be responsible for contributing to our own learning as well as the learning experiences of others. Because open dialogue questions and answers of every student are essential, any behavior or language that makes other students feel unsafe or unwelcome in this classroom cannot be tolerated (examples range from simply interrupting or ignoring others while they are talking to overt harassment or intimidation with reference to race, gender identity, sexual identity, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or ability). These expectations are essential to maintaining an environment in which everyone can feel safe discussing, examining, and responding to the content of the course. Please bring any violation of this policy to my attention as soon as possible.

COURSE TITLE is a combined lecture and discussion course. This means that, in part, all students are responsible for contributing to both their own learning experience and the learning experience of others. Because the contribution of ideas from each student is critical to the learning process, any behavior that makes other students feel uncomfortable in their learning environment will not be tolerated. This includes interrupting others while they are talking, carrying on conversations separate from the class discussion, or making comments that could be perceived as offensive in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, social-economic status, ability, etc. Please make every effort to maintain an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable sharing and responding to ideas.

University of Maine Non-Sexist Language Policy

[\(https://umaine.edu/womensgenderandsexualitystudies/home/non-sexist-language-policy/\)](https://umaine.edu/womensgenderandsexualitystudies/home/non-sexist-language-policy/)

Nonsexist language is written, verbal or nonverbal communication that is inclusive and does not reflect a bias based on sex. Language is sexist if it discriminates because of one's sex; reinforces the idea of one sex's superiority; or perpetuates sex and gender role stereotypes. Language that ignores, limits, or trivializes women and girls, and language that excludes or belittles women's values, perspectives, and experiences is sexist, as would be comparable language related to men and boys. Often language can unintentionally communicate sexism. University of Maine's Nonsexist Language Policy:

"The University of Maine, as an equal opportunity educational institution, is committed to both academic freedom and the fair treatment of all individuals. It therefore discourages the use of sexist language. Language that reinforces sexism can arise from imprecise word choices that may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory, or demeaning, even if they are not intended to be. Accordingly, all university communications whether delivered orally or in writing, shall be free of sexist language. Each member of the university community is urged to be sensitive to the impact of language and to make a personal commitment to eliminate sexist language. Supervisory personnel have a particular responsibility to discuss this policy with faculty and staff and to make available to them the guidelines on nonsexist language."

From Professor Christopher Fariss at Penn State University

Resources for Harassment

Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender, including violence and harassment based on sexual orientation, are a Civil Rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources here:  
[www.bw.edu/resources/hr/harass/policy.pdf](http://www.bw.edu/resources/hr/harass/policy.pdf)

Language and Gender

"Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Just as sexist language excludes women's experiences, non-gender-inclusive language excludes the experiences of individuals whose identities may not fit the gender binary, and/or who may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Identities including trans, intersex, and genderqueer reflect personal descriptions, expressions, and experiences. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (for example, first year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind, etc.). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Teachers and students should use gender-inclusive words and language whenever possible in the classroom and in writing. *Students, faculty, and staff may share their preferred pronouns and names, either to the class or privately to the professor, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.*" For more information:  
[www.wstudies.pitt.edu/faculty/gender-inclusivenon-sexist-language-syllabi-statement](http://www.wstudies.pitt.edu/faculty/gender-inclusivenon-sexist-language-syllabi-statement).

### Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: 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.
- ❖ 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.

—This Section Authored by Julie Beaulieu, PhD, English & GSWS Visiting Lecturer, University of Pittsburgh

**Resources for Teaching about Gender, Sex, Sexuality, and Consent**

Genderbread Person

<http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2015/03/the-genderbread-person-v3/>

Whitehouse Guide on Efforts to Combat Sexual Violence on College and University Campuses

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/17/fact-sheet-resource-guide-and-recent-efforts-combat-sexual-violence>

British police use tea as an analogy for sexual consent

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gp6aIIALDHA>

Gender Inclusive Sex Education

<http://scarleteen.com>

Pino, Nathan W. and Amber Blazek. 2011. “Teaching Sexual and Gender Identity in College Courses” *Currents in Teaching and Learning* 4(1):43-54.

[http://www.worcester.edu/Currents/Archives/Volume\\_4\\_Number\\_1/CURRENTSV4N1PinoBlazekP43.pdf](http://www.worcester.edu/Currents/Archives/Volume_4_Number_1/CURRENTSV4N1PinoBlazekP43.pdf)

Columbia University Guide to Gender Issues in the College Classroom

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/gender.pdf>

### Answers to Objections Made About Gender- Inclusive / Non-Sexist Language

- ❖ *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?

—This Section Authored by Scott F. Kiesling, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Pittsburgh

### Additional Resources

#### Non-Sexist Language Standards

American Anthropological Association:

[http://www.aaanet.org/publications/style\\_guide.pdf](http://www.aaanet.org/publications/style_guide.pdf)

American Philosophical Association

<http://www.apaonline.org/?page=nonsexist>

Chicago Manual of Style:

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

Linguistic Society of America:

<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/lsa-guidelines-nonsexist-usage>

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/608/05/>

#### Gender-Inclusive Language Standards

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

[http://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/LGBTCC-Gender\\_pronoun\\_guide.pdf](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/GenderNeutral\\_Language.pdf](http://inside.warren-wilson.edu/~writingcenter/GenderNeutral_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>

Gender-Inclusive Language Report, University of Wisconsin, Eau-Claire

<https://www.uwec.edu/usenate/motions/130409GenderInclusiveLanguage.pdf>

Marquette University Tips for Using Inclusive, Gender Neutral Language

<http://www.marquette.edu/wac/neutral/NeutralInclusiveLanguage.shtml>

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

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

National Council of Teachers of English: Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language

<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang>

Book: Language, Gender, and Professional Writing: Theoretical Approaches and Guidelines for Non-Sexist Usage. By Francine Wattman Frank and Paula A. Treichler (1989)

Report: Seattle University: Final Report of the Committee to Improve Trans Inclusion (Feb 2011)  
[http://www.seattleu.edu/uploadedFiles/Student\\_Development/Final%20CITI%20Report%202-18-2011%20\(3\).pdf](http://www.seattleu.edu/uploadedFiles/Student_Development/Final%20CITI%20Report%202-18-2011%20(3).pdf)