

Getting pronouns right for students

Pronouns are words we use to refer to people in conversation (for example, 'he', 'she' or 'they'). Using the right pronouns is part of creating a respectful learning environment. If teachers use the wrong pronouns for their students, students can find it distracting, distressing or alienating, at moments when they would otherwise be focused on learning.

This resource describes ways staff can help ensure they are using the right pronouns for students. It suggests some approaches intended to reduce stress and effort, for both staff and students. It concludes with some additional information and guidance around gender and identity.

The Eden Centre is working on additional guidance and support for inclusive teaching. Please get in touch if there are specific resources you'd like to see, or if you have questions: eden@lse.ac.uk

Sharing and using pronouns

The start of term is an opportune time to invite students to share the pronouns that you should use, and that students should use for one another. There are several routes students can use:

- In a class/seminar, students can give their pronouns when introducing themselves
- In a Zoom class/seminar, participants can add pronouns to their name: 'Jo (he/him)'
- In an on-campus class/seminar, you can distribute cards for students to write their names and display on the desk, and they can also add their pronouns
- Outside of class time, students can email you to inform you
- Pronouns can be added to an email signature

Opportunities to share pronouns can often be combined with chances to share what name to use, as students' names can differ from those shown on the class register. (Students can change their "known as" name, which is displayed in class registers, by visiting or submitting an online enquiry to the Student Services Centre.)

Collecting pronouns face to face during a class/seminar may seem the easiest route, but can put students on the spot, particularly trans students. It's good to indicate that it's optional: 'you can tell me what pronouns I should use for you, or you can let me know later.'

A simple way to normalise the process is by sharing your own pronouns. For example, include them with other introductory information ('You can call me Sarah, my pronouns are she/her, my email address...') Avoid being flippant or making a joke,) as that may reduce student trust.

Including any of these approaches in your teaching can minimise friction for students, and staff, around a potentially stressful experience.

What if you make a mistake?

If you use the wrong pronoun, give a quick apology, correct yourself and move on, as you would if you mispronounced a student's name: 'his example -- sorry -- her example was good.' If another student uses the wrong pronoun for a peer, you can either model using the correct pronoun as soon as you're able ('You're right, he made a useful point').

If you think you may use the wrong pronouns by accident, you can practice some phrases aloud in private to reinforce the association: 'Jo mentioned that -- he made a good point, his example was useful.'

Beyond the classroom

A student might mention their gender or pronouns in a one-to-one meeting with you. This could be intended as a request for you to use that pronoun in public, but it may not be. It's worth double-checking that it's OK to use those pronouns in public: 'should I use 'he' for you, in class?'

Pronouns don't necessarily tell you about a person's gender. You may be curious about why people use the pronouns they do, but as with any student issues, it's not normally appropriate to ask about students' personal history, medical history or body. Students may wish to talk about these things where it's relevant, either during a seminar/class or a one-to-one meeting, but allow them to initiate the discussion.

Students are entitled to absence from classes/seminars for transition-related appointments.

Varieties of pronouns

Some students may use gender-neutral pronouns, including they/them. Some may use pronouns you've not previously encountered, such as zie/hir - [see the end of this resource from Warwick](#). Again, you can practice in private to improve fluency.

Some students may offer more than one set of pronouns ('she/her or they/them'). This normally means you can use either, or switch between them.

Some people have no preferences as to which pronouns are used for them. They may express this as 'any/all' (to match the usual format). You can use any pronouns for these people.

If a student asks you to use a different pronoun at a later point, switch to using that.

You can use ungendered terms until someone shares their pronouns ("The person behind you..." / "They came to the office earlier.") or use their name, if you know it.

Part of a respectful environment for learning

Using the right pronouns for students contributes to a respectful atmosphere for learning. You can also consider how other aspects of your teaching can support this:

- In any introductory or '[ground clearing](#)' discussions and activities, you could mention respectful engagement with the subject of gender, and with peoples' lived experiences.
- Consider the teaching materials you are using (readings, case studies, examples). You could ask yourself: do they rely on gendered assumptions, or equate sex with gender? Is there room to discuss this during teaching, or is it possible to find alternatives?
- Avoid using gender as a basis for learning activities (to divide a class into two groups, for example).
- Be alert to the possibility of peer harassment during classes/seminars.
- Know about alternative sources of support and information for students, such as the LSE SU LGBTQ+ Society and [SU LGBT+ Officer](#)