

Pronoun Introductions – A Resource for SSW Faculty

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Trans inclusion has been an ongoing conversation in the SSW community in recent years, like at many other campuses. Trans and gender-nonconforming students identify pronoun use in class as a key site where microaggressions, ignorance and invisibility can interfere with learning and disrupt relationships. As instructors, it is our responsibility to foster a learning environment in which students can and will respect each other's genders and other identities. This resource outlines an easy way to establish the foundation for that informed, respectful environment.

The short version: What you can say when facilitating introductions

Current and recent SSW students have identified that an opportunity to share pronouns at the beginning of class is an important and effective piece of addressing pronoun use in the classroom. For example:

“Please introduce yourself to the class by sharing your name, what pronouns you'd like us to use when referring to you (such as he, she, they or something else), and [any other introductory question you want to ask]. We share pronouns because we know that you can't tell by looking what someone's gender identity is or how they want to be referred to. Sharing your pronoun today is optional – if you don't want to state a pronoun, for any reason, you don't have to. *If you do not share a pronoun*, we will not use any third-person pronouns to refer to you in this class. We will just use your name and 'you.' *If you do share a pronoun*, we commit to using the one you want us to use. We will also keep in mind that people's pronouns may change, and that people may use different pronouns in different settings, so we will not assume that the pronoun you ask us to call you here is the same one you want to be called everywhere or forever.”

Of course, instructors do not need to use this exact wording, or to all do it the same way as each other. Depending on your positionality, your experience with trans issues, and the topic of your class, you may find another effective way. Below is some explanation of the reasoning behind this sample script, so that you can think through how different ways of introducing pronouns may land for different students in your classes.

The long version: Why do we do it like that?

People have a wide range of previous experience with trans issues and gender pronouns – especially first summer students. It's important to provide enough information on the first day of class that people understand how they are expected to participate, and at least a little bit of the reasoning behind the practice.

The opportunity to share pronouns is important for people for whom others often guess the wrong pronouns, because it helps to prevent some of the misgendering microaggressions that are likely to occur. On the other hand, feeling obligated to share pronouns can put undue pressure on someone who is exploring gender, who uses different pronouns in different contexts, or who is uncomfortable being completely “out” about their gender on the first day of class. The option to skip is important so that people are not forced to choose between outing themselves and misrepresenting their gender.

The option to skip should not be taken as license for people to assume that someone's pronouns are “obvious.” Cisgender people who decline to share their pronoun on the basis that it is obvious, or who forget to share a pronoun and then later say that it's okay for people to guess the “obvious” pronoun, can be invited to reflect on the privilege connected to being someone who is never called the wrong pronoun because strangers always guess right.

After the first day

The opportunity to share pronouns should begin on the first day, and then be repeated at least a few times throughout the semester. This creates space for people to make different decision about what pronouns to share after they have a sense of the group, and for people to update the group if their pronouns change.

As the instructor, it is very important to model calling people the pronouns they have asked to be called. If you can't remember what pronouns someone uses, you can avoid pronouns (and just use the name), and/or ask the person to remind you.

When someone makes a mistake

If you notice that students are calling a classmate a pronoun that is not what that person requested, it is usually appropriate to correct them. One way to do this is to defer to the student in question (if present), saying something like, “Thank you for your comment. We’ll pick that up in a moment, but first, I noticed that you called Alex ‘she’ and I think I remember Alex saying that they use ‘they’ - Alex, is that right?”

The point is not to shame or embarrass anyone, but to make sure everyone has the information they need to respect each other, and so that trans and gender-nonconforming students don’t carry all the burden of reminding people of their pronouns. Just as the group would automatically correct each other if someone called a classmate the wrong name, correcting pronouns can be an easy part of the group norm.

Once the pronoun is corrected, you can usually move on with classroom discussion. Catching and correcting the mistake should not usually necessitate a big conversation about gender or make the person who was mispronounced into the center of attention.

If you catch yourself accidentally using the wrong pronoun, you can simply apologize, correct yourself, and move on. For example, say something like, “I saw her – sorry, I saw *him* raise his hand,” and then continue with what you were going to say. Later, outside class, it’s often helpful to reflect and figure out what you need to do in order to avoid repeating the mistake. You can encourage your students to take a similar approach.

If mispronouncing is an ongoing issue in your class, it can be helpful to check in with the student(s) who are often mispronounced to find out what response would feel most supportive to them.

If a student seems to be having ongoing difficulty getting someone else’s pronouns right – or if you do – the trans inclusion resources available at <https://www.smith.edu/ssw/tgnc> may be helpful.