
What the heck is a “PGP”?



Pronouns are everywhere. We use them every day in speech and in writing to take the place of people’s names. We use them without even thinking about it, but have you ever tried speaking without using any pronouns? Give it a try. Whoops, I meant to say “Give speaking *without using any pronouns* a try.” It’s not easy, is it?

Pronouns may not seem like that big a deal, but they become a bigger deal when you try to live without them. And for some people, pronouns are a big deal because other folks don’t always use the correct pronouns to describe them. A **preferred gender pronoun**, or **PGP**, is simply the pronoun or set of pronouns that an individual would like others to use when talking to or about that individual.

In English, the singular pronouns that we use most frequently are: I, you, she, her, he, him, and it. “I”, “you” and “it” are what we call “gender neutral” or “all gender”, but “she”, “her”, “he” and “him” are gendered. This can create an issue for transgender and gender nonconforming people, because others may not use the pronouns they prefer when speaking to them or about them.

One way to make sure that your GSA or club is being inclusive and welcoming for transgender or other gender nonconforming people is to incorporate PGPs into your regular intro activities. If you start every meeting by having those present share their names, ask them to share their PGPs as well. For example: “My name is Jasmine, I’m a sophomore, and my PGPs are ‘she’ and ‘her’.” “Hi, I’m Diego. I’m 17, a senior, and my preferred gender pronouns are ‘he’, ‘him’, and ‘his’.”

Some people prefer that you use gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns when talking to or about them. In English, the most commonly used singular gender neutral pronouns are **ze** (sometimes spelled **zie**) and **hir**. “Ze” is the subject pronoun and is pronounced /zee/, and “hir” is the object and possessive pronoun and is pronounced /heer/. This is how they are used: “Chris is the tallest person in class, and ze is also the fastest runner.” “Tanzen is going to Hawaii over break with hir parents. I’m so jealous of hir.”

Remember: Just like sexual orientation, a person’s gender identity can be a very personal and private thing. GSA members (or anyone, for that matter) should never feel pressured to share how they identify. If someone does choose to share, that’s great, and that information should remain confidential within the GSA unless that person has specifically said that it’s okay to talk about elsewhere.

We should also remember that the idea of PGPs and gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns will be a new concept to a lot of folks, and that mistakes will happen. The activities on the next page will help you gain more practice using gender neutral pronouns and PGPs.

Note on updated language: This resource was updated in 2012 to reflect the growing movement to share one’s PGPs by simply listing them rather than saying “my PGPs are male” or “my PGPs are feminine,” recognizing that we can’t necessarily infer one’s PGPs simply by hearing them described as “male” or “feminine”. Could a person identify as female and also prefer he/him/his? Sure!

Activity 1: Neutralize It!

For this activity, you will need at least two people and some reading material.

This activity can be done either in pairs or in a larger group. Ask students to grab a book they are reading either for a class or for fun. Novels with a lot of character descriptions and narrative would work best, as they will have the most subject, object and possessive pronouns. Scan the pages to find a section with a lot of pronouns, and ask for a volunteer to go first.

One at a time, have students read out loud for thirty seconds, replacing all the gendered pronouns (she, he, her, him) with gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns (ze or hir). If the reader accidentally misses a pronoun, the group will have the opportunity to politely correct him/her/hir. Part of being a good ally to transgender people is letting folks know when they use an incorrect pronoun or when they say something that might be offensive to the trans community. The responsibility of encouraging gender neutral and trans-inclusive language should not rest solely with trans individuals.

Remember: Not everyone is comfortable reading aloud, and folks should be able to opt out of this activity. Students who don't want to read out loud could be the timekeepers, or scan other books for the next section to read.

Activity 2: Telling Hir Story

For this activity, you need at least four people and scrap paper or notebook paper.

Ask the students to partner up with someone that they don't know very well. After everyone has a partner (it's okay if there is a group of three), explain that everyone is going to share their two-minute life story. Students will go one at a time, and their partners will record the details of their partner's life on a piece of paper. It might be helpful to post some guiding questions or keywords on a flipchart or whiteboard, such as: name, family, hobbies, pets, interests, career plans, dreams, etc.

After two minutes of one person sharing, the two should swap places: The person writing will be the one talking and vice versa. If there is a group of three, allow an additional two minutes so that each person has had a turn talking, a turn writing, and a turn just listening.

Bring the large group back together in a circle and ask for a volunteer to go first. Each student will then take thirty seconds introducing his/her/hir partner to the rest of the group, making sure to **only** use gender neutral pronouns. It is the responsibility of the rest of the group (not the person being introduced) to politely correct the speaker if he/she/ze makes a mistake and uses the wrong pronoun. Note: This activity can also be done in small groups if you have a large club or not a lot of time.

Possible discussion/reflection questions: How easy or hard was it using only gender neutral pronouns? What was it like having someone use a gender neutral pronoun to describe you? What do you think it would be like to have people regularly use the incorrect pronouns to describe you?

Handy dandy list of pronouns! The list of pronouns being used in the English language is ever growing, so here is a list of the ones we know. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, and we plan to keep it updated as much as we can. If you know of a set of pronouns that should be on this list, let us know!

We should also point out that some people don't want you to use pronouns at all; they would simply prefer that you just use their name. Additionally, more and more people are using "they", "them", and "their(s)" as singular, gender inclusive pronouns, even though they have been traditionally used as plural pronouns.

SUBJECT PRONOUN	OBJECT PRONOUN	POSSESSIVE PRONOUN	REFLEXIVE PRONOUN
_____ is an activist.	I am proud of _____.	That is _____ book. -or- That book is _____.	That person likes _____.
She	her	her/hers	herself
He	him	his	himself
Ze*	hir	hir/hirs	hirsself
Ze*	zir	zir/zirs	zirsself
E or Ey	em	eir/eirs	eirsself or emself
Per	per	per/pers	Perself
Hu	hum	hus/hus	Humself
They (are)**	them	their/theirs	Themselves
Name	Name	Name's/Name's	Name

*Additional alternate spellings for "ze" are "zie", "sie", "xie", and "xe."

**When using "they" as a singular gender inclusive pronoun, you would still conjugate associated verbs as you would for the plural version, as in "they are an activist" or "they like to go shopping", not "they is an activist" or "they likes to go shopping."