

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", but "she", "her", "he" and "him" are not. This can create a problem 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 male."

Some people prefer that you use gender neutral pronouns when talking to or about them. In English, the singular gender neutral pronouns are **xie** (sometimes spelled **zie**) and **hir**. "Xie" 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 xie 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. And when you're going around the circle, if someone shares his/her/hir PGPs and you don't think that's how that person really identifies, don't challenge it. Everyone has the right to "take a pass", especially if they're not ready to share more.

We should also remember that the idea of PGPs and gender neutral 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.

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 pronouns (xie 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 trans 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, 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/xie 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?