



Linguistic Society of America

## Guidelines for avoiding misgendering in professional communications

*Approved by the LSA Executive Committee, May 2021*

This document corresponds with the [LSA's statement against linguistic misgendering](#) and provides a brief guide to practical ways to make written and verbal communication in linguistics (with colleagues and students) more gender-inclusive and identity-affirming.

Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of the United States, as upheld by the Supreme Court, discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexuality constitutes harassment, and is illegal when it creates a hostile or offensive work environment (see the [EEOC](#) on sex-based discrimination). Under Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexuality constitutes harassment in education settings that receive federal aid and includes protections for students of linguistics, as well as faculty and staff. Additionally, misgendering speech is not protected under U.S. law (*Meriwether v. Shawnee State Univ.* 2020). In a professional setting, misgendering someone is one form of discrimination based on gender that may constitute harassment, and this is compounded when such harassment is combined with professional hierarchical asymmetries (such as faculty-student or supervisor-employee power disparities).

Here are some ways you can improve your professional communications (e.g., scholarly articles, teaching materials, emails, interactions with students) to avoid misgendering:

- Choose gender-neutral terms whenever possible when talking or writing about collective or generic subjects.
- Avoid unnecessarily binary terms (e.g., men and women, he or she) when a gender-neutral one will do (e.g., students, they).
- Always use an individual's appropriate name, title, pronouns (and/or other gendered morphology). If you don't know what gendered language a person uses, find out by consulting their website or official biography, or by asking.
- When talking about people whose pronouns you do not yet know, using *they* may be a temporary solution. However, if you learn the appropriate pronoun is something else, use that (even if that pronoun is a neopronoun).
- Use avoidance strategies (e.g., only using someone's name, using pronoun-drop, using 2nd person instead of 3rd person, or others) only as a last resort.

- If you notice a colleague misgendering someone, especially a student or other subordinate, correct them, even if the misgendered person is not present to witness it.
- Avoid explicitly gendering students in class discussions with “Mister” or “Miss,” “ladies” or “gentlemen,” or “guys” and “gals” as terms of address. Learn and use your students' preferred names; lobby your institutions to allow students to indicate their preferred names and pronouns on official rosters.

If someone’s gendered language is not currently grammatical for you, don’t worry: evidence has shown that people are able to acquire various features of the grammar over time (see Ackerman, Riches, & Wahlberg, 2018; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Everyone makes mistakes when learning new ways of using language (even their own). A willingness to learn and accept correction gracefully will go a long way. In the Resources section below, we link to Kirby Conrod’s blog series which addresses many strategies for practicing particular pronoun uses.

This document cannot feasibly discuss all possible interactions and social situations that you may encounter as a professional linguist. See the Additional Resources and Further Reading for more in-depth information and examples.

## Resources

- [Kirby Conrod's blog posts](#); [start here](#) for an introduction
- [Lal Zimman's blog posts](#)
- [THEY2019 Pronouns in the Classroom Guide](#)

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