Strategies for Gender Inclusive Language

Written and personal communications often rely on gendered language; that is, language referencing the gender binary of female and male. This results in unintentional exclusion of people who do not identify as either men or women. Assumptions play a key role in this. For instance, when we first meet someone we may make assumptions about their gender based on appearances, dress, or voice, which may result in people being misgendered. Most people want to be inclusive, but do not know how. Others are trying to learn new ways of speaking, but are struggling with making it stick. We have put together simple strategies and practical tips for effective and efficient shifts in language to instill confidence and encourage inclusive and respectful interactions.

Pronouns

Pronouns are how we refer to one another in the third person. The most common pronouns are "she/her" and "he/him." There are also various gender-neutral pronouns, including the most commonly used "they/them." Others may request that you avoid referring to them with pronouns altogether, asking that you simply use their name.

Someone you know may announce they are transitioning and will now go by different pronouns than they were raised with, or someone shares that they go by singular "they/them" pronouns. For many, new pronouns are difficult to adopt at first. It feels awkward and challenging with lots of mistakes. This is normal. You are not alone. You may be wondering: "How do I make these changes without hurting or frustrating this person?" Counterintuitively, relaxing and practicing are your best bet. There are strategies and exercises at the end of this summary that will help you get there.

My pronoun:

THEY

Greetings

There are several common and respectful greetings that are based on a binary-only understanding of gender. For example, we commonly hear "ma'am and sir" and at formal gatherings frequent refrain is "Ladies and Gentlemen." These result in unintentional exclusion. These happen within a customer service context or in group settings where not everyone is well acquainted with each other. We often assume based on how someone looks (i.e., feminine or masculine) what their gender identity is (i.e., woman or man) and then use the corresponding greeting based on our assumption (i.e., ma'am or sir). This is a shortcut that works for many people, but not all. And for those for whom the assumptions do not work, it happens with such frequency in ways that are exhausting and overwhelming. Another common greeting that happens at formal gatherings is "Ladies and Gentlemen."

Here are a few suggested ways to expand these and other greetings to be inclusive of people who do not identify as either men or women. This includes phrases, such as:

- "Good morning, folks!"
- "Welcome, esteemed friends, to this evening's event."
- "Hello everyone!"
- "And what would you like?"
- "How are you all doing?"

Terms

Perhaps more engrained and challenging are gendered terms that only reference two genders of female and male. Below is a list of frequently and lesser known gender-neutral terms. It is useful to employ these terms when talking to a group of people with mixed genders. This ensures the most inclusion.

Type of Term	Binary Gender Term(s)	Gender-Neutral Term(s)
Gender Identity	Woman/Man	Person/Individual
Relationships	Husband/Wife	Spouse/Partner
	Nephew/Niece	Nibling
	Sister/Brother	Sibling
	Brotherhood/Sisterhood	Camaraderie/Fellowship
Positions	Fireman	Firefighter
	Stewardess	Flight attendant
	Anchorman	Anchor
	Chairman	Chairperson/Chair
	Weatherman	Meteorologist
	Head Mistress/Master	Principal
Sayings	Fall Guy	Scapegoat
	Everyone and their mother	Everyone and their parent
	Two-man Job	Two-person job
Personality Traits	Feminine: Supportive, nurturing, understanding	People who exhibit supportive, nurturing, understanding tendencies
	Masculine: Leaders and ambitious	People who exhibit leadership and ambitious qualities

For more detail and information, please refer to this article on how the US Marine Corps is changing its job titles to be more gender-neutral, including related shifts in thinking.

Strategies, Tips, and Exercises

Adopting new pronouns and/or gender-neutral language does not happen automatically or by osmosis. It can be taxing and frustrating at first. With some intentional effort, you can round the bend. A key part of adopting unfamiliar language is using as many modalities as possible (e.g., writing, visualizing, listening, and reading). Fortunately, research shows the malleability of the mind and anyone can indeed learn new tricks. Here are a few strategies, tips, and exercises for your exploration and use. A mixture of these will increase the chances of success of learning new language and approaches.

1. Write the name and the pronouns of your co-worker, friend or family member on a post-it note and put it somewhere highly visible at home where you frequently sit or walk by (e.g., computer screen, mirror, and fridge). Every time you see the post-it note, say their name and pronouns out loud. The reading and hearing new name and pronouns functions as a double reinforcement to encourage learning of new references to someone familiar.

2. If you are about to meet with someone whose pronouns are new or difficult for you to use comfortably, you can visualize them in your mind and say to yourself their name and pronouns several times. This primes the mind for the proper reference with more success.

3. During the interaction, slow down your speech so you can hear yourself talk. You may need to self-monitor your speech for a while as you are learning someone's new pronouns along with accompanying gender inclusive language. As it becomes smoother, there is less and less need for this kind of careful consideration.

4. You can also collaborate with other co-workers or friends to hold each other accountable for using the proper name and pronoun. Others can gently correct you when you accidentally use the old name or pronouns: "I think you meant ___" (either during or after the interaction). Most of the work can and should be done without the transgender or non-binary person in your midst. This makes the stakes of missteps lower. You may want to add a lighthearted element, such as "Quarter Jar", with participating colleagues contributing a quarter to the jar each time they misgender, and then donate the sum to a local charity.

5. Write a short story (i.e. 3 to 4 paragraphs) without using any binary gender language. You can only use "they/them" pronouns as well as gender-neutral terms and greetings. Using names are ok. You are invited to write out the story by hand. Handwriting allows for double reinforcement of learning by writing and visualizing the story. After you are done, learning is strengthened by reading the story out loud to engage hearing. Reflect on how the experience of writing, reading and hearing the story was for you.

The experience of writing a story in this manner is initially difficult for many people. It may require a shift in thinking with many instances of defaulting to binary language to begin with. However, with some effort and slowing down, people are able to consciously shift to use of new language. Some people may notice how they start to focus on other identifiers. For example, "someone with long hair" rather than a woman, or "the person who raised me" rather than father. This allows for clearer or more specific language to indicate what it is we are talking about or wish to convey. This reveals an underlying reality about the hidden cost of binary language. That is, we often (over)rely on gender as a shorthand to reference other concepts without being specific or spelling out the significance of the distinction. We start to see the broader benefit of gender-neutral language beyond being more inclusive of transgender and non-binary people. #WeAllWin