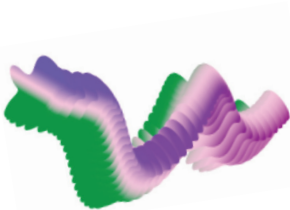


# PRONOUN GO-ROUND

**A pronoun go-round is an activity in which members of a group tell each other their preferred pronouns. This short guide, provides questions to consider and best-practice examples to help you plan one.**



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For an extended version of this guide including images, audio, video interviews and an extensive list of resources, see: [http://ttttoolbox.net/Who\\_is\\_in\\_the\\_Classroom::index.xhtml](http://ttttoolbox.net/Who_is_in_the_Classroom::index.xhtml)

Created by the working group *Who is in the Classroom?* – Flo\*Souad Benaddi, Åke Sjöberg, Kolbrun Inga Söring, Eva Weinmayr.

## A short glossary of terms

**Cisgender** is a term used to describe people who identify with the binary gender (informed by their genitalia) they were assigned at birth. For example, if you identify as a woman and are designated female at birth, you are a cisgender woman.

**They, them, their** are pronouns used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is non-binary or unknown. Merriam-Webster Dictionary's entry for "they" illustrates: "I knew certain things about ... the person I was interviewing ... they had adopted their gender-neutral name a few years ago, when they began to consciously identify as nonbinary—that is, neither male nor female." In addition, in English, you can also use specific gender-neutral pronouns such as zie/zim/zis, ey/em/eir.

The reflexive pronoun **themselves** (or **themselves**) is a pronoun that refers to the subject of a sentence or clause, e.g., 'They said they wanted to do the work themselves.' Merriam-Webster Dictionary points out that since the non-binary singular pronoun has become more popular, the reflexive themselves (or themselves) is also gaining traction.

**Misgendering** is when someone either intentionally or unintentionally refers to a person in ways that do not align with their gender identity. Most commonly, this means using the wrong pronoun – for example, referring to someone who identifies as a woman as 'he'. For binary or non-binary transgender people misgendering can have serious mental health consequences including depression and higher rates of suicide and self-harm. Referring to transgender people by their chosen name and pronoun reduces these risks.

**Microaggression** is indirect, subtle or unintentional discrimination against members of marginalised groups, informed by social and cultural biases, misinformation or a lack of understanding of other people's lives, identities and experiences.

Microaggressions may have to do with how we say things or behave, or may be part of our surroundings. For example, a schoolbook might perpetuate ableist, homophobic or racist stereotypes. These aggressions might seem small but can very negatively affect people's lives. They can cause mental health problems, especially when they occur regularly. Microaggressions are felt by the person receiving them but often not understood as harmful by the person performing them.

## **What is a pronoun go-round?**

A pronoun go-round is an introductory round at the start of a meeting, where everyone shares the name and pronoun by which they want to be addressed. It's a great way to get to know everyone and simultaneously to reduce the projections and assumptions that people bring to one another.

## **How does it work?**

Start by getting everyone to introduce themselves. Say something like: "I'd like to ask you each in turn to please share your name, pronoun and access needs, then tell us one thing you like about yourself. But if you're uncomfortable with sharing, you can say 'pass'."

As the facilitator, you should go first "I'll start us off: my name is Serin, my pronouns are they/them, my needs are being met, and I am a good cook." Then choose the person to go after you and the direction of the go-round. It often works well to sit in a circle so people can see one another. With each person's introduction, make a note in your head or in writing of the individual's needs.

Remember, the go-round is a tool you can shape to your needs and preferences. Experiment with it. Ask for feedback. Be curious. The more you practice, the better.

## **Why is it important?**

Research has proven that persistently failing to use someone's chosen name and pronouns can negatively affect their mental health (see glossary).

# PRONOUNS

**Pronouns are short words such as ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘they’ that act as substitutions for names. The ones that concern us here are third-person pronouns such as ‘they’, ‘he’ and ‘she’.**

## **How are they used?**

“Sofia likes ice-cream. *Their* favourite flavour is Raspberry. *They* always pick the same flavour.”  
“Daniel is good at maths. It is *her* favourite subject at school.”

## **Example of pronouns in English**

Singular pronouns for talking about people in English can be **they/them/their**, she/her/hers, he/him/his, zie/zim/zis, ey/em/eir.

## **Assuming pronouns**

Some people use more than one set of pronouns, others have never thought about pronouns as something they could choose for themselves.


- With a pronoun go-round we can begin to rethink how we address each other. Some questions to consider are:  
“What pronoun do you use to describe yourself?”  
“Do the pronouns that people use for you feel alright?”  
“Do you know if the pronouns you use to refer to your peers are correct according to them?”
- If you have forgotten someone’s pronoun or are not sure, you can always ask them again by first introducing your pronoun and then asking them for theirs. For example, “Hey my name is Suli, and my pronoun is he, what is yours?”
- If someone asks your pronoun and does not introduce theirs, it’s always a good idea to ask them.
- If you don’t have a preferred pronoun, it’s good to think about how you express this in the go-round. Say, “I don’t have a preferred pronoun” or “I haven’t made up my mind yet” or “I can’t make up my mind yet” rather than “I don’t care” or “call me whatever you want.” These last two answers suggest that the correct pronouns are of no importance, when in fact they are important to some people.
- Respect people’s pronouns – especially after a pronoun go-round.
- If you **misgender** someone don’t make a fuss. Correct yourself and move on. It’s okay to make mistakes when we are trying and learning.
- Some people might not be “out” outside the classroom. Make sure you know how they want to be referred to (name/ pronoun) outside school and carefully respect these needs as a form of protection.

# NAME

**Names are a bit like pronouns.  
Both function as descriptors.**

## **Given name and chosen name**

Sometimes someone chooses to use a name different from the one they were given at birth. For those who don't identify with their given name, it can cause deep anxiety and distress if others keep calling them by their given name rather than their chosen name.

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- Trans\* and non-binary people often go by names other than those written in official documents such as administrative files at school.
  - Make a written or mental note of their chosen name and do your best to use it.
  - This can help someone to feel safer, to be present and to participate in the classroom.
  - Here, it is again important to note that some may not be “out” outside the classroom. Make sure you know how they want to be referred to (name/pronoun) outside school, and carefully respect these needs as a form of protection.

# ACCESS & ACCESSIBILITY

**Everyone has abilities.  
Everyone has access needs.  
These are different for each person.**

## **Normative needs**

Some needs are likely to apply to most or all members of a group; toilet breaks, internet access, a good night's sleep etc.


## **Less normative needs**

Some needs might be on the atypical end of the spectrum, connected to having dyslexia, ADHD, food allergies, being hard of hearing or using a wheelchair, to give just a few of many possible examples.

## **Checking your able-bodied perspective**

When we think about access needs we need to approach it from a non-able-bodied perspective. We need to check our internalised ableism by acknowledging that the world we live in is built first and foremost for able bodies and minds.



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- In an access round, people can share what kind of support they need to work well within the space and with their peers.
  - The phrase “My access needs are being met” acknowledges that we all have access needs.
  - Don’t say “I don’t have any access needs.” It ignores the fact that you have been able to gain access, because your probably normative access needs are in fact being met.
  - Remember, even if we try hard, access is not always possible, since we live in an ableist world with predominantly ableist infrastructure. A genuine intent as well as understanding of access needs and empathy can help a lot here.
  - Ask what actual needs someone has before, during or after the event – so that next time you can be more prepared and aware.
  - Sometimes the best thing is just to be there when there isn’t access and understand and acknowledge the problem.

# VERBALISING CONSENT


**Consent is the basis of any human interaction. Reaching consent and respecting it is important when we share with one another.**

## **Consenting to share**

Participating in a pronoun go-round can be an exciting and validating experience. It can open up space for acts of sharing and listening. It can create trust and intimacy, which can be a valuable experience for groups and their participants.

## **Consenting to not share**

This being said, it does not have to be everyone's experience. Some might not want to share, or share in this group. Some might have prior experiences of pronoun go-rounds that have left them feeling unsafe. Others might not be ready to come out to the group.

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- Establish consent prior to the go-round. This includes being clear about why you are doing it and how.
  - Consent can be reached in different ways. One is that the group itself negotiates and agrees on the ways in which it wants to function during and after the pronoun go-round. The participants establish a set of guidelines (code of conduct) to which people can then agree. For example:

“We agree that whatever is shared within this place will not be shared outside it.”

“We agree to use the go-round as a tool to try to make the space safer for all participants.”

“We’ll try to make enough time for everyone to speak.”

“If you need to leave the room because you feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to do so.”

- Another way is to communicate and use existing codes of conduct already established by the school’s working environment.
- Consent should be an ongoing process. Even if some sort of social contract has been established at the start, it is important to leave room for this consent to be continuously revisited in line with the group’s needs and development.

# PASS

**Passing is a way of keeping the go-round moving if someone decides they don't want to share their pronoun or access needs.**

## **How is it used?**

Before beginning a pronoun go-round it is good to remember that not everyone might be comfortable with sharing something personal.

Introducing the pass option can relieve the pressure of having to share something one is not comfortable with or having to excuse oneself and leave the room.

- Introduce the pass option properly, for example:  
“If it is your turn to share and you are not comfortable with sharing, you can say ‘pass’. You do not have to explain why you are not comfortable with sharing.”
- Make sure that everyone understands that the use of “pass” creates an inclusive and safer space.
- Saying “pass” allows people who don’t want to share their pronoun or name to stay in the room.
- Be clear about its function. It is not for cisgender people to say “I don’t care what my pronouns are – therefore I pass.” This can come across as a **microaggression**. It invalidates the importance the correct pronoun might have for others in the room.

# LANGUAGE


## **Language has the potential to make or break our relationships.**

### **The words we use make a difference**

Inclusive language is another important element in the classroom and in working environments in general. How we speak to each other and what words we use can make a huge difference to how our relationships develop.

### **Language has the potential to make or break our relationships**

Sometimes the language we use excludes and oppresses others, and even ourselves. It is a powerful tool that at times reinforces violent hegemonic norms – whether gendered, ableist or racist. At the same time, language can be incredibly validating when used with awareness.

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- Mindful language practices are important. That means, you should learn to take the time to listen to each other and respect the ways individuals describe and live their identities..
  - Sometimes you might involuntarily use language that excludes others. Don't be afraid to be corrected or to correct someone.
  - You can de-gender the language by saying post officer instead of postman, person instead of man/woman, humankind instead of mankind and firefighter instead of fireman, to name a few.
  - Also avoid using "male" or "female" when you talk about reproductive systems. Just use standard anatomical terminology such as "testes" or "ovaries", "penis" or "vagina."
  - If you are talking about people specifically in relation to these sex characteristics, you can say "people with penises" or "people with vaginas". This is also important when you talk about pregnancy. You can use "pregnant person" instead of saying "pregnant woman" because not all pregnant people are women.
  - Keep in mind that sex organs and gender identities are not one and the same and are not as binary as we are often taught they are. Such an awareness is rarely part of standard education and it would make a big difference if it was.

# SAFER SPACE


**Pronoun and access go-rounds do not, in and of themselves, create safer spaces.**

## **How to make a space safer**

Pronoun go-rounds, accessibility, verbalising consent, the pass option and inclusive language are tools that can help to make a space safer. However, as long as society is ableist, transphobic, racist, etc., no space will be truly safe.

The many intersections found in the classroom can cause discomfort in various ways. Here, open dialogue and negotiation around safer spaces can really help.



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- Be clear from the start what is the expected code of conduct in the space, but allow negotiations to happen within the group too. A good strategy for this is verbalising consent (see above).
  - Establish a “no tolerance” policy for violence, harassment and hate speech, and make sure that everyone knows what this means. Give examples of what they can be and why they are unacceptable.
  - Open channels for ongoing critical dialogue and thinking around safer spaces and how you evaluate your code of conduct for these with students, peers and co-workers.
  - Discuss with your group what should be the consequences of problematic behaviour, if any, and how you can help each other break potentially unconscious biases or discriminatory habits, whether social, linguistic or other.
  - Act as a good example for the group and allow the space to gradually grow safer according to the group’s needs. In this way trust can be built step by step.
  - You could pass around a form for students to fill in their pronoun information, access needs and other key information.
  - Most importantly, making space safer is an ongoing practice that needs to spread into every single aspect of working together in the classroom or at work.


# EXPERIMENT

**There are many ways to do a pronoun and access go-around.**

**Keep experimenting and don't be afraid of getting something wrong.**

## **A starting point**

This guide serves as a starting point for introducing a go-round. You can print it out, take it to school and adapt the suggestions to your specific context.

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- Use these suggestions as a starting point but don't feel you have to do them all at once.
  - Always try to get feedback.
  - You can try out things with the group, reflect on how they worked, adapt and try again.
  - Experiments can fail and that is OK. Don't be afraid to make mistakes – we all do. What matters is how we deal with them (see “After Care”).
  - If you happen to hurt someone's feelings, practice apologising. That too can be a learning experience.
  - Experiment, ask questions, be curious. The more you practice the better.
  - All of this might seem a bit overwhelming, but it can actually be a lot of fun.

# AFTER CARE

**Sharing your pronoun during a go-round or in another situation doesn't guarantee that people will gender you the way you asked them to.**

## **Don't stop at the pronoun go-round**

A pronoun go-round is only the beginning of a path towards a more respectful classroom. It might take time and won't happen overnight but we are all learning. And if one tries, one also makes mistakes. This is why a special "after-care" is needed after pronoun go-round.

### **If you have misgendered someone**

- Apologise, correct yourself and then move on.
- Be aware that big apologies can make a fuss of the moment and always remember: it's not about you.
- Respect the fact that the person you misgendered might not like to talk about it.
- Don't make any excuses. Instead, go and practice. (See exercises and workbooks listed at the end of this document)

### **If you are being misgendered**

- Address and correct the person directly, if you have the energy and the opportunity.
- Write an email, if you don't have the strength to address it publicly. This can have as much impact as a one-to-one conversation and can save you from the anxiety of an immediate response.

### **If you witness misgendering,**

- Act as an ally and remind people of the correct pronoun. If misgendering continues, take the person doing it aside and stress how important it is to use correct pronouns. Make sure to look after the person who has been misgendered.
- The more people address misgendering the less likely it is to happen again.

### **If you are misgendered in a video-conference**

- Make sure you have typed your chosen pronoun next to your username.
- Use the chat box as "a reminder" when it is difficult to interrupt or correct people online. For example: "Our pronouns are written next to our usernames. Let's use them!"
- If it is an on-camera meeting, you can wear a handmade name or pronoun tag (as you would during a regular meeting) and if misgendering is happening, you can always just point at the tag.
- As a moderator, remind participants to use the shared pronouns if you notice that this is not happening. Or ask participants to write you a private message if their chosen pronouns are not being used.

# **How to start a pronoun go-round in your specific context.**

## **Who is going to be there?**

It is good to think about who is going to participate in your activities. How can you plan and facilitate the pronoun go-round to best benefit the individuals and the group? Are you working with children, young people, adults? Are they students, colleagues, volunteers?

## **What is the purpose of the activity?**

Is it to learn or to socialise? Are people attending because they want to or because they have to?

## **How to start a conversation?**

### **What do we need to know about each other?**

When we meet new people, we frequently start with small talk. This can be a great way to start interacting with others. Often small talk is limited to certain topics, for example, identity categories like nationality. However, it can be alienating to ask “Where are you from?” It might be more constructive to talk about what actually connects you, the moment, shared histories, the weather, etc.

# **Use some icebreaker to kickstart a conversation and keep it light-hearted.**

## **In early education like primary or secondary school**

In a school classroom you can ask about participants' hobbies, favourite subject or what they like to do on holiday.

## **In highschool or university**

On a university course, where people gather around similar subjects, you can ask why they chose this course or what they intend to do with their knowledge when they leave. Another good question is: "If you could choose, in which historical period would you like to live?"

## **Take a more abstract route**

You can ask people to share what their favourite meal is, their favourite colour or a dream. You can ask, "If you were a plant, which one would you be?" or "If you could be a hybrid of two animals, what would you choose?"

## **Movement or sound**

Another way is to ask people to express themselves through movement or sound. You could brief them: "Make a sound or a movement that represents how you feel in this moment."

## **Write tags instead of using spoken word**

If you don't want to do a spoken go-round, you can write tags. Set up a table with paper, pens and paints where people can get together and craft their own name and pronoun tags. Provide elastic bands or safety pins to fix the tags to clothes. Make sure the tags are visible to everyone in the group.

## **Make a map together**

Maybe spread a big sheet of paper on the floor or a table to draw on and map everyone's names and pronouns.

# Selected resources and organisations

## ENGLISH

GLSEN Educator Resources. <https://www.glsen.org/educator-resources>

Trans\*Ally Workbook – Getting Pronouns Right & What It Teaches Us About Gender. Davey Shlasko, 2014.

The guide to being a trans ally. Straight for Equality, 2020. <https://straightforequality.org>

## FRENCH

Genre.s Pluriel.le.s. <http://www.genrespluriels.be/>

Trans-inter-action. <https://trans-inter-action.fr/>

Trans\*guide, Guide d'accompagnement pour l'inclusion des personnes trans dans l'enseignement supérieur en fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2018. <https://cutt.ly/1mfcCoH>

## SWEDISH

Transformering. <https://transformering.se/>

RFSL (Riksförbundet för homosexuella, bisexuella, transpersoner, queeras och intersexpersoners rättigheter). <https://www.rfsl.se>

Oavsett kön – Handbok för arbete med jämställdhet och trans, RFSL, 2020. <https://www.rfsl.se>

You can also find this guide in French and in Swedish:  
[http://tttoolbox.net/Who\\_is\\_in\\_the\\_Classroom::Teaching\\_Materials.xhtml](http://tttoolbox.net/Who_is_in_the_Classroom::Teaching_Materials.xhtml)

