

# Best Practices for Pronoun Use

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## Introduction

The National Speech & Debate Association Coaches' Caucuses have indicated that we could offer our community more information on how to be inclusive of the LGBT+ community. As the NSDA works to be a more inclusive organization, we have taken steps to use pronouns in a more responsible manner. For instance, we have updated our Code of Honor and publication guidelines to use the singular "they" pronoun. While making changes internally is critical, our organization also strives to set standards for the community.

Correct pronoun usage is a crucial step for making the speech and debate community safer and more inclusive. Pronouns are how we identify others in our daily communication, and they are often associated with the gender of the person we are referring to, e.g. "she", "her", "he", "his". An individual's biological sex assigned at birth does not determine their gender. However, it is common that we use pronouns to describe a person based on their outward appearance or perceived gender. It is important to take a more conscious approach to the way that we identify others' genders in our daily conversation. Mistaking a person's gender by using the incorrect pronouns can invalidate, disrespect, or threaten the safety of that person. This creates an inhospitable classroom and tournament space both in terms of social interaction and competitive success.

In practice, don't assume that a person's gender presentation corresponds with their pronoun usage. At first, listen carefully for referential details in which a person may self-disclose their pronouns. If you would like to establish a connection to someone, you might say, "I use them/them/their pronouns. May I ask what pronouns you use for yourself?" It also means replacing "you guys" and "ladies and gentlemen" with language that includes people who identify as genderqueer, transgender, or outside of the gender binary. Alternative phrasing could include "esteemed guests/competitors/judges/coaches" or "hey everyone/folks." Being conscious of the language we use to describe our speech and debate peers demonstrates that we value the safety and diversity of our community. Please join us in our commitment to make speech and debate a safer space by reading, reflecting, and adding to this best practice document for pronoun use.

Below are some suggestions we've compiled about pronoun usage along with some additional resources that may be helpful in increasing knowledge and understanding. This guide is a starting point and is not intended to be the only resource consulted. Best practices are constantly evolving and require further research, examination, and reflection.

## Suggestions for Pronouns

1. Review your team's handbook, website, and promotional materials, and identify areas where you use gender-specific pronouns ("she," "her," "hers," "he," "his," etc).

2. Revise your materials to be more inclusive by using gender-neutral pronouns such as the singular “they.” (This is increasingly accepted as grammatically correct - see resources below.)
  - Using “they” as a singular pronoun recognizes that some students do not identify as male or female. It also helps avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes.
  - Using the singular “they” pronoun in your official dress code, for example, helps students of all genders know they may choose to dress in a manner that makes them feel comfortable. While “they” is the most commonly used gender-neutral pronoun, other pronouns you may consider include “ze” or “hir,” which replace gendered pronouns like “he,” “she,” “his,” or “hers.”
  - The links below provide additional context and information. Be open to additional iterations of what is acceptable or more inclusive. This is a fluid topic and the youth are help drive progress in this area.
3. When introducing yourself, introduce your pronouns. It can be considered an outward sign of respect to ask someone you do not know the pronouns they use, and if you begin the introduction in this manner, it could make the inquiry feel more natural.
  - For example, “Hello, my name is Bruno E. Jacob and my pronouns are he/his, I work at the NSDA.”
4. If you do not know the pronouns that should be used and do not have the ability to ask, use non-gendered pronouns.
5. Have conversations with students and judges to determine what pronouns to use when referring to them.
  - Judges interact with students during the round when providing feedback, starting the round, or answering questions. Students interact throughout the competition with one another in a variety of ways. These conversations can happen student to student, adult to adult, or adult to student in a variety of contexts.
  - Note that in a lot of literature, the term “preferred pronoun” is used; however, some have suggested that we drop “preferred” from the term. Trans Student Educational Resources explains the rationale: “Using ‘preferred’ can accidentally insinuate that using the correct pronouns for someone is optional.”
6. Be aware that a person’s pronouns can change over time. They may also change based on context. A person may feel comfortable asking their team to refer to them using “they” pronouns, but not comfortable using “they” pronouns at a public event. It may be worth having a conversation about when the pronouns should or should not be used given that it can change in social contexts.
7. If you host a tournament and have any badging, ribbons, or trophies consider offering an option for individuals to identify their pronouns.
  - Consider using software that includes the option of sharing pronouns at tournaments to help make the speech and debate community a safer place. You can learn more about Tabroom's options at [www.tabroom.com](http://www.tabroom.com). Ask if these features exist when looking at potential platforms to use for your tournaments.
8. If you make a mistake regarding a pronoun, own it and apologize. The apology should be quick and not over the top, as drawing out the apology only adds more attention to the mistake. Consider simply “I am so sorry, I made a mistake and it won’t happen again.” Please refrain

from making excuses such as “its so hard” or “I learned grammar this way” as that minimizes the person harmed.

9. Have conversations with students, coaches, judges, community members, professionals, and anyone willing to engage in these discussions on an ongoing basis about how to be supportive!
  - If you hear others not being supportive, practice speaking up. If you overhear someone using pronouns improperly, speak up and make the correction. Keep reading material as there are continual developments in what is a best practice.