



# Tips for gender-inclusive communication

*Leiden University Diversity and Inclusion Expertise Office, January 2023*

Leiden University is committed to creating an inclusive and engaged community. As a university, we recognise that not everyone is comfortable with a binary approach to gender identity. Gender identity is not the same as sex, and we recognise that gender identities are not limited to male and female but include non-binary and transgender identities. Everyone can contribute to an inclusive learning and working environment by choosing appropriate forms of salutation and using inclusive language.

## Gender inclusion in our house style

The gender-inclusive language [writing guidelines](#) in the University's style guide provide guidance for staff and students on forms of address, the use of first names and titles, and a communication style appropriate to our institutional culture. We recommend consistently applying these guidelines to official communications, automated messages, forms and policy documents. The following principles apply:

- Acknowledge gender diversity and address others appropriately. Respect each other's preferences in address.
- To be able to select the appropriate address, consider asking for people's preferences or use a gender-inclusive form of address. Only ask about biological sex when truly necessary.
- For automated communications, choose a neutral address as it is not possible to ask for people's preferred salutation or adjust to their individual preferences in this case.
- Use gender-neutral salutations and forms of address in communications to groups of students, staff and visitors (e.g. 'Dear colleagues' instead of 'Dear Sir or Madam').
- Use gender-neutral job titles.
- Apply inclusive terminology to policy documents and official communications.

This guide aims to provide information and clarification on the use of gender-inclusive language. It explains both gender inclusion in the house style and topics that are not otherwise part of our policy. We offer this guide as additional information for staff and students.

## **Explanatory notes: gender and forms of address**

### *What is gender?*

Gender identity is the way a person self-identifies in relation to gender (e.g. male, female or non-binary). Gender identity is not necessarily tied to biological sex. A transgender person's gender identity does not correspond with their sex assigned at birth. Non-binary and gender-fluid individuals do not feel comfortable identifying as only male or female. Gender identity also can evolve, just as our identity changes with age or parenthood. There is a wide spectrum of gender identities. As a result, appearance, assigned sex or first name does not necessarily indicate a person's gender identity or preferred form of address.

### *Forms of address*

An appropriate form of address shows respect and creates an inclusive and welcoming environment. However, mistakes are sometimes made: for example, if someone has a first name that can be used by both men and women and receives a letter with an address that does not correspond with their gender identity. Or if colleagues are addressed as 'Ms' alongside their title (Dear Prof. Ms Jansen) when they neither want nor appreciate this.

Biological sex and first names do not provide certainty about the proper way to address someone. That is why it is useful to ask for someone's preferred form of address first or choose a neutral one that suits everyone.

## Gender-neutral alternatives to gendered forms of address

| Salutation  | Gender inclusive alternative   |
|---|--|
| <b>Situation</b><br>Formal and automated communication, messages directed at groups | <b>Advice</b><br>Use gender-neutral address<br>Full name/initials<br>Title                                 |
| Dear Sir,<br>Dear Madam,<br>Dear Sir or Madam,<br><br>Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,    | Dear student,<br>Dear colleague,<br>Dear participant,<br>Dear reader,<br>Dear user,<br>Dear candidate etc. |
| <b>Situation</b><br>Formal communication directed at one individual                 | <b>Advice</b><br>Use full name/initials, or Title  |
| Dear Mr Van Leiden,<br>Dear Mrs Van Leiden,<br>Dear Ms Van Leiden,                  | Dear M.A. van Leiden,<br>Dear Marijn van Leiden, <sup>1</sup>  |
| Dear Dr Van Leiden<br>Dear Prof. Van Leiden<br>Dear Ms Van Leiden                   | Dear Professor Van Leiden<br>Dear Dr Van Leiden  |
| <b>Situation</b><br>Informal personal communication                                 | <b>Advice</b><br>Preferred name  |
| Dear Marijn,  | Dear Marijn,<br><br><i>If preferred name is not known</i><br>Dear student,<br>Dear colleague,              |

### Asking for preferred form of address

It has long been common practice when preparing forms (e.g. for event registration) to ask a person's sex to determine which form of address ('Dear Mr Jansen'/'Dear Ms Jansen') should be used in the registration confirmation email, but is that necessary? Asking about biological sex can unintentionally leave a student, member of staff or visitor who does not feel comfortable with the categories of 'male' or 'female' feeling left out. And it is actually

<sup>1</sup> Research shows that our staff and students find this address most appropriate.

unnecessary to know a person's biological sex or gender to communicate with them. For example, the University Library does not record information about users' genders, and uses forms of address that do not require information about gender.

To find out how someone wants to be addressed, you can ask for their preferred honorific (and not their biological sex or gender identity):

#### **Preferred honorific**

- Mr
- Ms
- Mx (gender-neutral honorific)
- No gender-specific honorific (full name, e.g. 'Dear Marijn van Leiden')

#### *Questions about gender identity*

If you need to register gender (e.g. in a survey whose purpose is to learn how respondents with different gender identities perceive a certain topic), it is important to consider how this relates to current privacy laws. One way to protect privacy is to make answering questions about gender identity voluntary. It also is crucial to offer at least three gender options, so people with, for instance, an 'x' in their passport can also choose a suitable option.

If you need to ask people's gender identity, provide these options:

#### **Gender identity**

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Don't want to say
- None of the above, namely:

*Be critical: is it truly necessary to ask this, given the purpose of the form?  
If so, consider applying these guidelines.*

## **Additional information**

### *Email signature*

You can also state your preferred form of address in your email signature. That makes it easier and clearer for everyone, and then there is no need to ask. Adding your pronouns to your email signature is also a way of showing solidarity: if many people indicate their preferences, it normalises the idea that gender in an address is not automatically linked to a name or appearance, and that we should give people the opportunity to indicate what they prefer to be called.

The University's [signature tool](#) provides options to add pronouns to your email communications:

Kind regards,

First name Second name

Title

Pronouns: he/his, she/her, they/their

Obviously, adding pronouns to your email signature is an individual and voluntary choice.

### *Preferred names, Studielink and digital systems*

It is good to realise that some people do not use their legal name (e.g. they use a shortened version or nickname) or may feel uncomfortable with their legal name, regardless of their gender identity. Being confronted with a name someone no longer identifies with can be stressful. Fortunately, there are now a growing number of solutions to avoid such situations. Staff can fill in their preferred name in SAP; students can do so in Studielink. Once the preferred name is entered in the registration system, it will automatically be updated in Microsoft Teams, uSIS, Brightspace and email.

### *Pronouns in texts*

In the past, 'he' was used as a generic pronoun to refer to all students, lecturers and administrators. Now it is customary to use at least 'he/she' and 'his/her' in texts where the

gender identity of individuals is not clear. But to accommodate more than two genders, it is better not to limit the use of pronouns to 'he/she' or 'his/her' and instead use 'they' or 'their' if the gender identity is not clear. Pronouns, by the way, are not always necessary. You can also promote gender inclusion by deliberately avoiding the use of pronouns. The PhD Regulations are a good example of this.

Where pronouns cannot be avoided, here are the options:

- 'He/she/they' or 'they'
- 'His/her/their' or 'their'

Suppose you have a colleague or student in your lecture who identifies as non-binary and prefers the pronouns 'they/their'. How do you use them?

*They/their*

'They' is the personal pronoun:

They have a lecture tomorrow.

'Their' is the possessive pronoun:

Fenne is taking their notebook along.

Many people find it confusing when they/their refers to a person, while the verb form is singular. If you want to clarify that you are referring to one person, you can use someone's name or title.

I went with Jari to see their family. They brought along a cake.

The use of gender-inclusive pronouns is not a formal policy and is therefore an individual choice. We hope this information will enable staff and students to make conscious choices about how they can contribute to a respectful and inclusive learning and working environment..

### **Questions?**

Please contact the Diversity and Inclusion Expertise Office at [diversiteit@leidenuniv.nl](mailto:diversiteit@leidenuniv.nl)

More information about the use of (gender) inclusive language:

- [Use of gender-neutral pronouns in Dutch](#) (PDF)  
A practical guide to gender-neutral pronouns in Dutch
- [Pronouns brochure](#) (PDF)  
All about gender identity and pronouns
- [Tool kit for unnecessary gender registration: to ask about gender or not?](#)  
Decision framework for registering gender, by sector
- [Call Me By My Name](#)  
Blogpost about the importance of names and preferred names
- [Sam Smith and their pronouns](#)  
On the use of gender-inclusive pronouns (in Dutch)
- [Gender-neutral language in the European Parliament](#) (PDF)  
Practical advice on using gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language
- [Gender neutral is really better](#)  
Interview in Mare with lecturer Eliza Steinbock about their experiences with gender-neutral language at Leiden University