



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

discovering voices

What are pronoun introductions? Information for schools

It has now become common practice in University debating competitions for judges and participants to express their preferred pronouns at the beginning of the debate. This small statement, which takes up very little of everyone's time, can ensure that debates remain as inclusive as possible to all participants, whatever their gender identity. Of course, misgendering (i.e. being referred to as a gender other than the one you identify with) is a problem that can affect anyone and cause more stress in what can already be a stressful environment. To mitigate any chance of upset or discomfort amongst participants, we therefore want to start using pronoun introductions as a matter of course.

In practice, this means that at the beginning of each debate, participants, when they are introduced, will express what pronouns they prefer to be referred to by. For example, when the debate chair asks the judges or participants to introduce themselves, they will respond:

'My name is John Smith, and I prefer "he".'

Or

'My name is Cynthia, and I prefer "he" or "they".'

Or

'I'm Anita, and I don't mind what pronouns you use.'

At this point, everyone participating in the debate makes a mental note (or a physical note) of these preferences and uses the requisite pronoun to the best of their ability throughout the debate. Formal debating can include a lot of gendered language (e.g. 'The previous speaker mentioned X. She is wrong because...', or use of 'sir', 'madam', 'the honourable gentleman' etc.), and so it is important that all participants remain mindful of which pronouns to use.

It is important to note that there is no requirement to give a preferred pronoun, and it is perfectly acceptable to say 'I don't mind' or 'I decline to answer', or indeed to give no preferred pronoun statement at all. However, it is important that all participants are encouraged to make the statement, whether they identify as cisgender (gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth), transgender, or non-binary. This is in order to create an environment where everyone feels equally included and no-one feels like they are being put 'on the spot'.

Potential Issues

It is possible that schools will receive concerns or difficult questions about this procedure from students or parents. It is important to remind participants and their parents of the necessity for inclusivity in debates, and if they would like more information, ask them to contact the ESU. If you yourself have any further questions, feel free to get in touch with me (elle.mcloughlin@esu.org)

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