

HOW CAN I BUILD AN LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM?

Creating an inclusive class environment is important both for facilitating learning and fostering a climate of belonging for LGBTQ+ students. Many instructors want to be gender inclusive and to make sure LGBTQ+ students feel both welcome and supported, but are unsure of the best approach. Working with LGBTQ+ graduate students at Harvard, the Bok Center has developed this guide to provide actionable steps instructors can take to build inclusivity in their teaching.

► How can I signal an inclusive classroom in my syllabus?

Use gender inclusive language in the syllabus. It is important to make sure that all students feel represented in the syllabus, which can be done by using the singular third person pronoun “they/them” when discussing a hypothetical student. The singular “they/them” pronoun is gender-neutral and is distinct from writing “he/she” to convey inclusivity, which may exclude trans and non-binary students.

Include a [statement of diversity and inclusion on your syllabus](#) to articulate your commitment to creating an inclusive class environment. You may also choose to reference [Harvard University’s policies prohibiting Title IX sexual harassment and other sexual misconduct](#) or other resources linked through the [Office for Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging](#) and the [Office of Gender Equity](#). Discuss your commitment to non-discrimination and your goals of inclusion with students on the first day of class to emphasize that bias, harassment, and discrimination are not tolerated in your course.



► How can I establish inclusive norms on the first day of class?

Invite students to share their pronouns, if they wish. You can model this by [sharing your own pronouns when you introduce yourself and then inviting students to share](#) their pronouns in their introductions. Some students may not feel comfortable sharing their pronouns with the class, so be sure to invite—rather than require—students to share. Take care to use the pronouns that students share, and [respond respectfully to inadvertent uses of the wrong pronoun](#).

Create a group agreement to establish norms for discussions that affirm respect for students and their identities. The agreement can highlight the importance of respectful interactions and your expectations that everyone enter into discussion and debate with sensitivity and consideration for their classmates. Refer back to the agreement regularly, especially at the start of potentially difficult conversations in class. You can also encourage students to share any concerns with you directly, for example in office hours, via email, or by [collecting ongoing feedback](#).

► How do I encourage inclusive language in my class?



Foster gender inclusive language. Small changes in language can help you avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes while also being more accurate and inclusive in your word choice. In class, for example, the instructor can say “you all” when addressing the group, rather than saying “you guys,” and can encourage students to do the same.

When referring to students in class, use students’ names (e.g. “As Li highlighted...”) or gender-neutral choices, such as “as your colleague said” or “as your peer shared.” Encourage students to do the same, to avoid unintentionally misgendering someone by making assumptions about their gender and using gendered language.

► How can I bring inclusivity to the content of my lessons?



Review your course materials for inclusive language, accuracy, and representativeness. Consider any examples you cite in class, the syllabus, or assignments, and whether they make assumptions or certain perspectives are underrepresented or absent. If so, you can **adapt or expand them to include more representation** across gender identities, sexualities, races, ethnicities, abilities, ages, religions, or other aspects of diversity.

Share your goals for increasing inclusivity in your course at the start of term and ask your students for feedback throughout the semester. If you'd like to discuss your goals and approaches for **increasing inclusivity in your course design and materials** or ways to respond to feedback you have received, **schedule a consultation with Bok staff**.

► What should I do if a student makes an inappropriate remark, or if I say the wrong thing?

Communication can be challenging, especially in the classroom environment, where a number of complex messages may be in circulation with room for misinterpretation. Perhaps a student, or even you, says something that inadvertently offends another student. Or perhaps a student makes a hateful remark in the heat of a discussion. How should an instructor respond?

Many of these difficulties can be eased by having expectations about classroom culture clearly articulated in your syllabus and by setting up group agreements at the beginning of term. If the tension of a moment or situation moves beyond the class norms you have established, **we have developed a four-step framework** to help instructors consider how to respond:

1. *Attend to your own reactions*—take a moment to steady yourself and breathe;
2. *Understand the situation*—make sure that your understanding of the situation is as accurate as possible and sensitive to the different perspectives present;
3. *Develop a short-term response*—you might make it clear that a comment or act is unwelcome, acknowledge the various responses in the group, or validate a student who raised concerns about harmful language; and
4. *Consider a long-term response*—it may be helpful to check in with the class or individuals during the next class or via email, or consider incorporating more chances for students to share feedback.

It takes practice to develop facilitation skills and your own awareness of when and how to use the framework. It is impossible to prepare for every situation, but by setting expectations, building an inclusive classroom community from the first day of class, and attending to issues as they arise, you will develop your own toolkit, build confidence, and promote a more equitable environment in your classes.

Additional Resources

- Check out the **Office of BGLTQ Student Life**, the **Office for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging**, and the **Office of Gender Equity** to find resources and explore key terms as they relate to gender and identity.
- Visit <https://www.mypronouns.org/> for further discussion of pronouns and language to invite students to share their pronouns.
- **The Bok Center offers more information on inclusive course design** and is happy to **consult with instructors** on their syllabi and course materials.
- **Review and use this handout** from the Bok Center when considering how to respond to a difficult moment in class.

