

Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines

Introduction

Girl Scouts of Western Washington is an inclusive and welcoming organization that serves youth members and volunteers who reflect a spectrum of gender identity. To ensure our members feel welcomed, accepted, and respected—and to share with prospective members, donors, partners, and the community at large who our council serves—we have outlined gender-inclusive language guidance and best practices for communicating with our different Girl Scout audiences.

What Is Gendered Language?

Gendered language is language in writing and speaking that has bias toward or assumes a particular sex or gender identity of a person or group of people. This includes using binary (masculine or feminine) pronouns when a person's or group of people's gender identity is not known and extends to the use of other binary and gendered words ("businessman" versus "businessperson") and phrases ("ladies and gentlemen" versus "guests").

For more information and to further your learning, the National Institute of Health provides guidelines (with examples) on its website for [inclusive and gender-neutral language](#).

Our Commitment to Inclusivity

Girl Scouts of Western Washington is committed to providing safe, welcoming spaces for all the members we serve and the partners we engage with in our community.

As a more than 100-year-old organization, implementing gender-inclusive language guidance aligns with the change-making spirit of Girl Scouts as an institution that advocates for equity and is committed to ensuring that everyone has a seat at the table. At our founding, this commitment was rooted in empowering girls. Over time, we've expanded our commitment to welcoming any non-cisgender boys and transitioning young people as members but have been

inconsistent and ineffective at clearly articulating this shift and how it ties back to our mission.

In 2023, Girl Scouts of Western Washington adopted the phrase “girls and gender-expansive youth who identify with the girl experience” in an attempt to identify the different gender identities our organization serves. In practice, however, this phrasing is confusing, unintentionally exclusionary, and used inconsistently.

To remedy this, Girl Scouts of Western Washington has developed a definition for “girls and gender-expansive youth who identify with the girl experience” that can be used with girls* inclusively to speak to everyone who identifies with the Girl Scout experience.

The use of an asterisk in “girls*” to define who our Girl Scout members are today aligns with previous steps we have taken to make the Girl Scout Promise and Law more inclusive—offering an asterisk so that members may substitute the word “God” to reflect their own spiritual beliefs and the word “sister” with “sibling” to align with their own gender identity. The approach of introducing an asterisk allows us to honor our past while also continuing to adapt the ways that we show up to best serve the needs of youth today.

How We Define Girls*

Girls* refers to those who identify with the Girl Scout experience, which includes cisgender girls, gender-expansive youth, transgender youth, non-binary youth, gender non-conforming youth, genderqueer youth, and any girl-identifying human.

IMPORTANT: Girls* is intended for use with non-member audiences, with an aim to better inform and educate these individuals on our mission, the members we serve, and the value we bring to our community today. The use of girls* is not intended to be used when communicating with members so that we honor, respect, and avoid making assumptions around the gender identity of the members our council serves.

Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines for Member and Non-Member Audiences

The following guidelines are intended for use by Girl Scouts of Western Washington staff, Girl Scout volunteers and leaders, and our community partners.

Member Audience Guidance

Guidance for Addressing a Group

When communicating with more than one youth member and/or adult volunteer, it is best practice to refrain from using gender-excluding language in both written and verbal communications. Examples:

Written Communications

- Member emails and newsletters
- Member website resources*, including forms and documents
- Social media*
- Print and digital resources for members

Verbal Communications

- In-person and virtual Girl Scout programming and events
- Troop meetings
- Community engagement events*

**When communicating in environments that are viewed/attended by both member and non-member audiences, default to member audience guidelines*

Below are examples of gender-inclusive language that can be used when addressing a group (more than one) of Girl Scouts (youth or volunteers).

Note: While the term “Girl Scout” contains the word “girl,” all our members are “Girl Scouts” and considered as such, so “Girl Scout” can be used in substitution of “girl.” Some additional ideas for options you might consider substituting in to describe or talk about “groups of girls” are: campers, troop, team, crew, squad, participants, leaders, and change-makers.

Examples:

- ✗ We build **girls** of courage, confidence, and character.
 - ✓ We build **Girl Scouts** of courage, confidence, and character.
 - ✓ We build **youth** of courage, confidence, and character.
 - ✓ We build **change-makers** of courage, confidence, and character.
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- ✗ Help Girl Scouts unleash their inner leader! Prepare **girls** for a lifetime of leadership.
 - ✓ Help Girl Scouts unleash their inner leader! Prepare **them** for a lifetime of leadership.
 - ✓ Help Girl Scouts unleash their inner leader! Prepare **your troop** for a lifetime of leadership.
 - ✓ Unleash **your** inner leader and prepare for a lifetime of leadership.

Guidance for Addressing an Individual Girl Scout or Volunteer Directly

When communicating with Girl Scout youth or adult volunteers directly (one-on-one) in written or verbal communications, it is best practice to address the Girl Scout or volunteer by their name, you, or their pronouns. If you do not know their pronouns, you may ask. Be sure to also share your pronouns when introducing yourself to new Girl Scout youth and adult volunteers. Sharing your own pronouns helps create an inclusive environment. Please note, however, that if a member chooses not to share their pronouns that this should be respected.

When You're Unsure of a Member's Pronouns*

If you do not know a member's pronouns and are referring to them in a group discussion with other members, it is recommended to use "they" or "them" instead of assuming a gendered pronoun on their behalf. You can also use their name, if it is known.

**Girl Scouts of Western Washington plans to expand the examples below in a future version of these guidelines through the help of translation services to provide examples and use cases for non-English speakers.*

Examples:

- ✗ Whenever Lara's around friends with similar interests, **she's** even more adventurous.
- ✓ Whenever Lara's around friends with similar interests, **they're** even more adventurous.
- ✓ Whenever Lara's around friends with similar interests, **Lara's** even more adventurous.
- ✓ Whenever **you're** around friends with similar interests, **you're** even more adventurous.

Guidance for Updating Forms and Policy Documents

As a council that operates underneath the Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) umbrella, Girl Scouts of Western Washington staff receive many forms and documents from the national office to help us complete business operations and communicate policies for Girl Scouts to follow.

We have two options to reference when updating forms and documents to align with our gender-inclusive language guidance, based on the intended audience. As we note below, it may not always be possible to follow one recommendation or the other regardless of your intended audience—in which case, as long as you update your document following one of the options outlined below, your document is considered in compliance with our gender-inclusive language guidelines.

Girl Scouts of Western Washington aims to update our vast collection of forms and documents to be compliant with our gender-inclusive language guidelines on an ongoing basis, with a goal for all forms and documents to be gender-inclusive by September 30, 2026.

If you have questions or need guidance around updating a form or document, please reach out to the Marketing and Communications department for assistance at marketingteam@gsww.org.

Forms and Documents for Member Audiences

Because a majority of the forms we inherit from GSUSA are directed toward a member audience, we recommend updating any instance of “girl” used in the

form or document following the guidelines shared above for written and verbal communication to members.

Examples:

✗ Girl First Name

✓ Girl Scout First Name

✗ From camping weekends to cookie booths, adult volunteers must always be present to ensure their girls have fun and stay safe, no matter their grade level.

✓ From camping weekends to cookie booths, adult volunteers must always be present to ensure their Girl Scouts have fun and stay safe, no matter their grade level.

Note: If it is not feasible to update all references of “girl” to “Girl Scout,” due to a document’s length or complexity, then it is acceptable to follow the guidance for forms and documents intended for non-member or mixed member/non-member audiences, outlined below.

Forms and Documents for Non-Member Audiences

If the form or document you are updating is intended for a prospective member or community supporter audience—or a mixed audience of current members and non-members—then the following guidance is recommended.

For every instance where “girl” or “girls” is used, add an asterisk (girls*) and add the following definition to the footer of your document.

Girl Scouts of Western Washington uses the term girl inclusively to speak to everyone who identifies with the Girl Scout experience, which includes cisgender girls, gender-expansive youth, transgender youth, non-binary youth, gender non-conforming youth, genderqueer youth, and any girl-identifying human.

Note: If it is not feasible to update the form or document following this guidance, due to the length or complexity of the document’s design, then it is acceptable to follow the guidance for forms intended for member audiences.

Non-Member Audience Guidance

When and How to Use Girls*

As noted above, girls* should be used with non-member audiences only. This means anyone who is not a Girl Scout member and includes, but is not limited to, the following audiences:

- Prospective members
 - Youth
 - Volunteers
- Girl Scout supporters
 - Donors
 - Corporate partners
 - Foundation partners
 - Program partners
 - Community partners
 - Camp network
 - Girl Scout alums

Girls* should only be used when communicating with these audiences and must be used with the asterisk and full definition as provided above if used in writing. When written, the definition can be included at the bottom of the communication. If used in speaking, the definition should be provided at a point in the conversation. Example use cases for both written and verbal communications are provided below:

Examples:

Email to Non-Member Audience

✗ Through Girl Scouts, girls and gender-expansive youth who identify with the girl experience have access to safe, inclusive spaces where their confidence soars and they authentically belong.

✓ Through Girl Scouts, girls* have access to safe, inclusive spaces where their confidence soars and they authentically belong.

At end of email: *Girls refers to those who identify with the Girl Scout experience, which includes cisgender girls, gender-expansive youth, transgender

youth, non-binary youth, gender non-conforming youth, genderqueer youth, and any girl-identified young person.

In Conversation with Non-Member Audience Who Asks Who Our Council Serves

Con conversationally, it may not always make sense to provide the full definition of girls* unless asked specifically who our council serves. If the question is not asked directly, it is recommended when speaking generally to external audiences to use “girls and gender-expansive youth.” This may prompt the person you are speaking with to ask what “gender-expansive” means, following which you can provide the full definition above.

Examples:

✗ Through Girl Scouts, **girls** have access to safe, inclusive spaces where their confidence soars and they authentically belong.

✓ Through Girl Scouts, **girls and gender-expansive youth*** have access to safe, inclusive spaces where their confidence soars and they authentically belong.

Possible Response: You mentioned Girl Scouts serves girls and gender-expansive youth. Can you explain who gender-expansive youth includes?

✓ Girl Scouts of Western Washington uses the term girls* inclusively to speak to everyone who identifies with the Girl Scout experience. Gender-expansive youth includes transgender youth, non-binary youth, gender-non-conforming youth, genderqueer youth, and any girl-identified young person. **Note:** Following this definition and introduction of how the word “girls” is used, you can continue using it in conversation.

Our Website References

If you need to point a non-member to a resource on our website that explains who our organization serves, you can send them to any of the following pages, which includes the girls* definition.

- [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Racial Justice, and Belonging](#)

- [Join](#)
 - [Become a Girl Scout](#)
 - [Become a Volunteer](#)
- [Who We Are](#)
- [Program Partners](#)

Other Resources

- [Inclusive and Gender-Neutral Language \(National Institutes of Health\)](#)
- [Guidelines for Gender-Inclusive Language in English \(United Nations\)](#)
- Additional reference sites and resources to-be-added on an ongoing basis