

# NAME PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



Pronouncing names correctly is a big deal.

*"[It] always started with my name. The majority of my teachers made no effort to learn to pronounce it until they called roll for the first time. Inevitably they would publically butcher it. My first experience in virtually every classroom was some classmates snickering about my name."*

— Fazia Rizvi, actress

You care about your students, and you would never want to do anything that contributes to a student feeling shame and embarrassment that leads them to distance themselves from their families, languages, and cultures. But if you're not putting in the necessary effort to pronounce their names correctly, that might be exactly what you're doing.

These are the findings from a 2012 study called "Teachers, Please Learn Our Names!: Racial Microaggressions and the K-12 Classrooms," by Rita Kohli and Daniel Solorzano. Kohli and Solorzano report: Students' socioemotional well-being and worldview can, in fact, be negatively impacted by teachers' failure to pronounce names properly, and can even lead students to feel embarrassment and shame which results in their shying away from their own cultures and families.

In a 2014 post, "How We Pronounce Student Names, and Why it Matters," Jennifer Gonzalez puts it best: Mutilating someone's name is a tiny act of bigotry. Whether you intend to or not, what you're communicating is this: Your name is different. Foreign. Weird. It's not worth my time to get it right. It can lead to the student feeling marginalized.

In a 2016 Project Bronx video, teacher Adam Levine-Peres says failing to get a student's name right fails to establish an environment of trust, sends the message that perseverance is not important, and shows a lack of common courtesy that communicates disrespect.

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Even the National Education Association reports that minimizing the significance of trying to get a name right is a kind of microaggression (a brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or not, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights toward people of color).

All of this is to say: Pronouncing names correctly is a big deal.

So what's a teacher to do during pre-service week, when she or he is handed a roster of difficult-to-pronounce names? And for the secondary education set -- who are often

responsible for over a hundred students -- multiple rosters of difficult-to-pronounce names?

Since teachers are being tasked with quickly learning how to correctly pronounce (and then remember how to pronounce) many (often, very diverse) names, we thought it would be helpful to develop a guide to pronouncing names. In developing this guide, we crowd-sourced ideas on Twitter, and scoured the web for existing ideas and resources, which have been collected and consolidated for your convenience. Some of the ideas, you may already be implementing, but others might be new. Please read this guide with an open mind, and share it with other teachers.

### PRACTICE PRONUNCIATION

If there are names that already look like they might be a challenge for you, try to learn how to pronounce them before you even meet the students. You can ask around, or we recommend the [Pronounce Names](#) site (which now offers an Android app), or [VOA's Pro-nounce Guide](#), to practice pronouncing students' names as soon as you get your student rosters.

### ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

From Day 1, make sure you learn how to pronounce students' names correctly. If it's more comfortable, you can project your roster on an overhead/smartboard for the whole class to see, and have each student pronounce their own names, and practice saying it in response to get the hang of it. Then, write it out phonetically on your own roster for future reference.



Some South Asian American students, when they say their own name, are already giving you a Westernized or Americanized pronunciation. In a private setting, and if you are certain that this is the case, you can ask if they prefer to offer a pronunciation that their own families might use; if you're able to pronounce their name the way their families do, offer to use that pronunciation if they prefer. Keep in mind, however, that many students aren't offering the Westernized pronunciation for your benefit, but for their own comfort (it's complicated!), so proceed with caution and respect, and use your student's preferences to guide you here.

Rita Kohli [describes](#) her brother's experience of having his name mispronounced for his entire academic career -- something that can lead a person to feel they have checked a part of their identity at the door. For those South Asian American students who have had their own names repeatedly mispronounced again, and again, and again, it can sometimes become preferable to offer a Westernized or Americanized pronunciation (rather than the real pronunciation) by default. In some cases, this can be for your benefit, but in many cases, it can be tied to their sense of identity. *Especially* if you're being offered an already "watered-down" version of their name, it is critical to make your best effort to learn how to say it correctly. In either case, put in the effort.

### CALL-AND-RESPONSE NAME GAME ICEBREAKER

You can turn students sharing their name's pronunciation as an icebreaker. Have each student pronounce their own name as you go down the roster, and have all students repeat the name back (until everyone's got it). Put whatever spin on this you'd like, but don't set the game up so that only students whose names somehow look more complicated or foreign are the only ones participating.

### CELEBRATE NAMES AND IDENTITIES

Think about ways to celebrate and appreciate your students' names. The [My Name My Identity](#) campaign offers teachers various resources for how to honor their students' names, and gives students and communities a space to share the significance of their name and identity.

### EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Become familiar with common sounds and names from different cultures. This can happen naturally if you pay close attention to how people pronounce their own names when they introduce themselves to you, but can also happen if you purposefully begin consuming more diverse literature and media (Related - check out our [#BrownBooksProject](#)).

### BE RESPECTFUL, AND CONTINUE FINE-TUNING

[Jennifer Gonzalez](#) suggests there are three types of name-mispronouncers: (1) those who fumble over the names, seem apologetic or somehow suggest the fault lies with them and not with the name, but ultimately still fail to get the name right (you might know some people who fit into this group); (2) those who assume their own pronunciation is correct, or barge ahead with their own version even after being corrected (this is definitely not the group you want to fall into); and (3) the calibrators -- those who recognize that their getting a name correct will require effort, and continue to fine-tune their pronunciation of a name as time goes on, and may even check back in to ensure they are saying a name correctly (this final group is the one you want to be in).

As Gonzalez also reminds us: There are a variety of complicated names that we as a collective society have figured out how to say properly (Arnold Schwarzenegger, Renee Zellweger, Zach Galifianakis, as some examples).

### LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

Mistakes are acceptable, and they will happen. The important thing is to be respectful, and make an effort to learn from those mistakes.