

PRONOUN GUIDE

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to work

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are a small number of words used in place of a noun or noun phrase.

The most used pronouns are *personal pronouns*, which include:

- I (1st person)
- You (2nd person)
- He (3rd person)
- She (3rd person)

They are called *personal pronouns* because they refer to people.

Pronouns are a way people can refer to each other or themselves, when not using their name. We use them so we don't have to repeat a person's name over and over again in a sentence. For example, this sounds very clunky:

"Mark made pasta. Mark put cheese on top and gave me a bowl, and then Mark and I sat at the table and ate"

Whereas when we use Mark's pronoun (they/them), it sounds much clearer.

"Mark made pasta. They put cheese on top and gave me a bowl and then we sat at the table and ate"

Pronouns are often used to indicate a person's gender; however, we often make assumptions about people's genders and assign them pronouns based on what we can see, or based on their name, and sometimes this is incorrect.

- Most but not all men (including trans men) use the pronoun 'he'
- Most but not all women (including trans women) use the pronoun 'she'
- Some people (including many non-binary people) use a gender-neutral pronoun such as 'they'

Different types of pronouns

Pronouns are generally grouped by whether they're 'gendered' or 'gender-neutral'.

Gendered pronouns include:

- he/him/his
- she/her/hers

Gender-neutral pronouns include:

- they/them/theirs

Using a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to a single person has been done for centuries, and is grammatically correct. We do it naturally without thinking about it. If you walk into a meeting room and find a notepad on the table, you might say "Oh look, somebody has left *their* notepad".

Gender-neutral pronouns are also an easy way to refer to someone whose gender you don't know, without guessing. E.g., you get an email from somebody you've never met. You might comment to a colleague "I had an email request from someone called Chris. *They* enquired about attending the event next week."

Some people use neo-pronouns, such as:

- xe/xem/xyr
- ze/hir/hirs
- ey/em/eir

Neo (or new) pronouns may be used as an alternative to 'they'. While the most common neo-pronouns were introduced in the late 20th century, they have been documented in some English dialects since the 18th century.

Some people use multiple pronouns or 'rolling' pronouns, such as:

- she/her | they/them
- she/they
- he/they

People may use multiple pronouns for several reasons. Sometimes gender-fluid individuals might want to use different pronouns on different days depending on how they are feeling about their identity. Because gender is a spectrum and people can feel like multiple or no genders, rolling pronouns might feel more comfortable than a singular one.

Why is using the right pronouns important?

Using the language people ask us to use for them is not only polite; it's the right thing to do. Whether someone is using new language for the first time, or has been using it for years, it's just as important to make sure the ways we refer to them are correct and affirming.

Using the right pronoun for a person is one of the easiest simplest ways of showing them respect.

For many trans people, having people know and use correct and affirming pronouns is an important and validating part of their gender affirmation.

For many trans people, it's also important to use the right language for them even when talking about them historically, including their pronouns. If this feels difficult, try to think about using their name instead so you get the hang of not using old and incorrect language.

Sometimes it can take a while to get used to the new words someone uses to talk about themselves but using them and celebrating these changes are a great way to show them that you care about who they are and are taking their lead that what they are telling you is important.

How to know which pronoun to use when referring to others

You can't know someone's pronouns from looking at them or simply by their name. The best and only way to find out someone's pronoun is to ask them – preferably privately and always in a respectful way.

Try “What is your pronoun?” or “Which pronouns do you use?”. Avoid using the phrase ‘preferred pronouns.’

Here are some other ways you can normalise asking about gender pronouns:

- When introducing yourself, say your own pronouns, e.g. “Hi, my name is Nick, my pronouns are she/her or they/them”
- On your business card/email signature (e.g., underneath your name and title, add your pronouns)
- Use your pronouns on your virtual meeting platform profiles
- In a group situation there may be an introductory round; say your name and your pronouns. Other people may feel comfortable to also share their pronouns
- If you’re running a program/service, add ‘Pronouns’ as a field to be completed in your registration forms, and have a process to make sure they are communicated to relevant people.
- If you use name badges add a pronouns field
- This can feel awkward or unfamiliar at first; however, over time it will become a usual part of your language and practice ... plus it’s a lot less awkward than making assumptions and misgendering people

What happens if I make a mistake?

If you make a mistake, it’s OK, you’re human! Everyone slips up from time to time.

DO: apologise, correct your mistake and move on!

DON’T: make a big deal about it, go on and on about how bad you feel, or explain to the person how hard it is for you to get it right. This is highlighting the situation and could make the person you misgendered feel even more uncomfortable.

Learning to use pronouns differently or learning to use a different pronoun for someone you know, can take time and practise. That is perfectly normal. A good idea is to practise in private on your own or with a friend you trust. With time, it will become a normal part of your vocabulary.

Being a good ally / Stepping up for others

There may be a time where you overhear or have a conversation with someone and notice they keep saying the wrong pronoun when referring to someone. It is really important that you speak up for the person who is being talked about. If appropriate, correct/remind the person immediately by saying something like “Chris uses they/them pronouns” and then move on. If you don’t feel comfortable correcting the person in front of others, take them aside afterwards and have a conversation with them about how important pronouns are and what getting them right means to people.

How to use affirming pronouns yourself

If you’re uncomfortable with the pronouns people use for you, and want to use different pronouns, you can just do it. You don’t need permission to experiment or try something new, and you don’t have to use them forever if it ends up not being for you, either.

Once you’ve decided to try new pronouns it can be useful to first try them out with trusted friends and family members. This might be one person to begin with, such as a friend or an extended family member who supports you.