

Pronouns and Why They Matter

What are pronouns?

Gender pronouns, or sometimes just pronouns, are the sets of words a person uses to refer to their gender. Like other pronouns, they're used in place of nouns or noun phrases. Knowing and using a person's correct pronouns, regardless of how you perceive their identity, is essential to fostering inclusive, respectful relationships.

Many common sets of pronouns are considered standard in casual, business, and legal contexts, such as referring to individuals as "he" or "she." Lots of folks, both cisgender and transgender, use these pronouns already. However, there's a whole world of pronouns beyond these! Another set that we see commonly is singular they/them. Often considered to be non-gendered or gender-neutral, they are most often used by individuals whose gender is outside of the typical man-woman binary (e.g., Charlie is nonbinary, and they do not see themselves as a woman or a man). Other non-gendered pronouns we may come across include ze (pronounced zee) used in place of he or she or hir (pronounced *here*) used in place of him or her.



Avoid using "it" and "its" when referring to other people unless they specifically request that you do so. Many transgender and non-binary people feel that this phrasing is alienating and harmful.

Below is a table of common gender pronouns with examples so you can familiarize yourself!

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She is working. I worked with her. The pencil is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He is working. I worked with him. The pencil is his.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They are working. I worked with them. The pencil is theirs.
Ze	Zir/Hir	Zirs/Hirs	Zirself/Hirself	Ze is working. I worked with zir. The pencil is hirs.
Per	Per	Pers	Perself	Per is working. I worked with per. The pencil is pers.

Why are gender pronouns important?

Respecting someone’s identity includes recognizing and using their gender pronouns. Sometimes, a person’s pronouns may not be what we assume. For this reason, people should not be judged based on their appearance and it’s best practice to avoid assuming gender or gender pronouns when meeting someone new. These appearance-based assumptions are particularly harmful to transgender and non-binary people who are already disrespected and marginalized.



Inclusive pronoun usage may not seem paramount to you, but you never know who around you may need and appreciate that extra support.

How can I be more inclusive in using and respecting others’ pronouns?

Normalize the process of indicating your pronouns when and where appropriate. This means including them when introducing yourself (e.g., “Hello, my name is Benjamin and my pronouns are he, him, and his”). You can also include your pronouns in your email signature, on business cards, and in your biography. When you don’t know someone else’s pronouns, ask! With that said, please do use caution; it’s a good idea to make it a habit of asking everyone for their pronouns and not just certain people. If someone declines to disclose their pronouns, please respect that choice, too! This may be for reasons such as personal feelings or even safety.

What happens if I mess up?

That's okay! The best thing to do is acknowledge the mistake and correct yourself moving forward. You can say something like "I'm sorry, I meant 'they.'" Using incorrect pronouns or other gendered words for someone is referred to as *misgendering*. It doesn't have to be a big deal! Over-apologizing or making the situation bigger can make the person who was misgendered feel responsible for comforting you, but that's not their responsibility. If you catch someone using the incorrect pronouns for someone else, it is also good practice to correct them. This way, the person who was misgendered doesn't have to be embarrassed.