

# What and Why



## WHAT ARE PERSONAL PRONOUNS AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

In English, whether we realize it or not, people frequently refer to us using pronouns when speaking about us. Often, when speaking of a singular human in the third person, these pronouns have a gender implied -- such as “he” to refer to a man/boy or “she” to refer to a woman/girl. These associations are not always accurate or helpful.

Often, people make assumptions about the gender of another person based on the person’s

appearance or name. These assumptions aren’t always correct, and **the act of making an assumption (even if correct) sends a potentially harmful message** -- that people have to look a certain way to demonstrate the gender that they are or are not.

Using someone’s correct personal pronouns is a way to respect them and create an inclusive environment, just as using a person’s name can be a way to respect them. Just as it can be offensive or even harassing to make up a nickname for someone and call them that nickname against their will, **it can be offensive or harassing to guess at someone’s pronouns and refer to them using those**

**pronouns if that is not how that person wants to be known.** Or, worse, actively choosing to ignore the pronouns someone has stated that they go by could imply the oppressive notion that intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people do not or should not exist.

When we refer to "personal" pronouns, we don't mean that these pronouns are necessarily private information (generally they are not), we mean that they are pronouns referring to a unique and individual person.

Hopefully, you now have a fundamental understanding about why pronouns matter. If you'd like to know more and to hear stories from trans and gender nonconforming people about their lived experiences with pronouns, please check out some of the videos and links in the resources section of this website (</resources>). Once you understand what we're talking about and why, let's learn about how to use personal pronouns (</how>).



# How

## HOW DO I USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS?

When a person shares their pronouns (/sharing), they are naming the pronouns that they want to be referred to by in the singular third person (when referring to that person while talking to someone else). Singular pronouns in the first person (when referring to yourself) or second person (when referring to a person when talking to that same person) do not vary. For reference, however, we have included examples of singular first person and second person pronouns, as well third person pronouns.

*Singular first person pronouns (that you should continue to use, as is):*

“I am a writer and wrote that book **myself**. Those ideas are **mine**. Do you like both **me** and **my** ideas?”

*Singular second person pronouns (that you should continue to use, as is):*

“**You** are a writer and wrote that book **yourself**. Those ideas are **yours**. I like both **you** and **your** ideas.”

*Singular third person pronouns (that you should use as appropriate based on the pronouns the person being referred to goes by):*

Each of the following sets of pronouns may be the sets that certain people indicate should be used to refer to them. Below, they are presented in the forms of most common usage.



Usually, the “they/them” pronouns set is acceptable to use when you don’t yet know if a person goes by another set or sets of pronouns. You can learn more about the centuries of history behind the singular “they” pronoun to refer to an individual in the resources section (/resources). It is also possible to avoid pronouns, as demonstrated below under “no pronouns.”

Just because a person goes by a certain set or sets of pronouns is not indicative of that person’s gender. A person could be transgender or not transgender (also called “cisgender” - the vast majority of the population is cisgender) and might share the pronouns they go by. A person could be a man or a woman or both or neither and share any number of these sets of pronouns as the correct ones to use for them, but which set they go by is not necessarily indicative of their gender, even though for most people there is an association between the pronouns they go by and the gender they are.

*She/Her:* “**She** is a writer and wrote that book **herself**. Those ideas are **hers**. I like both **her** and **her** ideas.”

*He/Him:* “**He** is a writer and wrote that book **himself**. Those ideas are **his**. I like both **him** and **his** ideas.”

*They/Them:* “**They** are a writer and wrote that book **themselves**. Those ideas are **theirs**. I like both **them** and **their** ideas.” Please note that although “they” pronouns here are singular and refer to an individual, the verbs are conjugated the same as with the plural “they” (e.g. “they are”). Also note that in this singular pronoun set many use “themselves” rather than “themselves,” although both are typically acceptable.

*Ze/Hir:* “**Ze** is a writer and wrote that book **hirselves**. Those ideas are **hirs**. I like both **hir** and **hir** ideas.” Please note that “ze” is usually pronounced with a long “e” and that “hir” and its forms are usually pronounced like the English word “here.” Some people instead go by “ze/zir” pronouns because of the more consistent pronunciation and spelling - see the resources section for more pronouns sets (/resources).

*No Pronouns - Use My Name* (example for someone whose name is “Lan”): “**Lan** is a writer and wrote that book. Those ideas are **Lan’s**. I like both **Lan** and **Lan’s** ideas.” If the reflexive component was important to communicate a message, you could use alternative language such as “**Lan** wrote that book unassisted” or “**Lan** was the sole author of that book.” Some might simply say “**Lan** wrote the book **Lan’s self**.”



There are additional sets of pronouns that some people might use (e.g. *ze/zir*, *per/pers*, *ey/em*, *xe/xem*, etc.). Please check with the person who goes by those pronouns and/or look for online resources (*/resources*) to determine the proper ways to utilize them. Some people go by multiple sets of pronouns, and usually that means that it is okay to use any of the sets they go by. Some people ask that others vary the pronouns that are used within certain sets of pronouns. If in doubt about what that means for someone or to request examples of how to do that in practice, let the person know you want to be supportive and ask the person for more information or examples so that you can get it right.

Please note that there are also nonbinary, gender-neutral titles (e.g. "Mx." usually pronounced like "mix" instead of "Mr." or "Ms.") and nonbinary, gender-neutral language that can be used for everyone (e.g. "friends and guests" instead of "ladies and gentlemen"). While this website is focused on pronouns, you can find more information about gender-neutral language through our resources page (*/resources*).

You can also find more information about some of the more common pronouns sets through these links, which can also be used as a way to point others towards information about that pronoun set:

- <http://pronouns.org/she> (<http://pronouns.org/she>)
- <http://pronouns.org/he> (<http://pronouns.org/he>)
- <http://pronouns.org/they> (<http://pronouns.org/they>)
- <http://pronouns.org/ze> (<http://pronouns.org/ze>)
- <http://pronouns.org/neopronouns> (<http://pronouns.org/neopronouns>)

Now that you know how to use personal pronouns, what if you make a mistake or you see someone make a mistake by using the incorrect pronoun (*/mistakes*)?

# Mistakes

## WHAT IF SOMEONE MAKES A MISTAKE AND MISPRONOUNS SOMEONE ELSE?



Depending on the cultural, organizational, and situational context, and the personalities and positionalities of the people interacting, there are many different ways to act if there has been a mistake in referring to someone with the incorrect pronouns. Below are a few example scenarios of ways that people correct themselves or intervene if someone makes a mistake. Please note that these examples focus on times when mistakes are made because of forgetfulness or

ignorance -- different strategies may be necessary when people get pronouns wrong because they are being intentionally and consciously hateful.

### *If you just recently made a mistake:*

**Example 1.** You are talking about someone who goes by “he/him” pronouns. “She is a great student. I’m sorry, I meant to say he is a great student. He’s been reading all of the assignments very thoroughly and it’s been a pleasure to work with him.” You don’t have to make a big deal out of your mistake or draw a lot of attention to it. You mostly need to fix it. You might have a follow up conversation with the person you referred to incorrectly to apologize or see if there’s something else you can do to correct

it moving forward besides doing better. Making it a bigger deal in the moment is not necessarily helpful and could be harmful unless that's what the person who was incorrectly referred to wants. Depending on the situation, you might be worried that people think you aren't friendly towards transgender people because you made a mistake, but generally it's good to avoid making the situation about you and your intent. A good way to show you are friendly is to get it right in the future and to act upon some of the other guidances you may find through this website or other resources.

**Example 2.** You are talking in a meeting about someone who goes by “they/them” pronouns. “His idea for that project is going to work very well. Let's try that.” Later, after the meeting, you realize that you used the incorrect pronouns for that person, so you go to them and say: “I'm really sorry I used the wrong pronouns for you in that meeting earlier. I know you go by ‘they/them’ and I will make sure I get it right next time.” You don't have to linger on the topic if the other person doesn't want to talk about it further, you can simply work to do better.

*If you realize you've been referring to someone with either an assumed set of pronouns or pronouns that might no longer be correct:*

**Example 3.** You have a friend who you've always called “she” because you always thought the friend is a woman and goes by “she.” You never had a reason to think anything else would be appropriate, but because you've recently learned that making assumptions about pronouns could be problematic, you realize you might want to ask people -- even those who you think are cisgender -- what pronouns they go by. “Hi Tennishia, how are you? ... I recently was learning about personal pronouns and so I've started to tell people that I go by ‘she’ and ‘hers’ pronouns myself. It helps me to create an environment where other people can feel comfortable to tell me what pronouns they go by, because some people really aren't comfortable with the pronouns everyone around them assumes work for them. I know we've known each other a long time, and I've always used ‘she’ and ‘hers’ pronouns to refer to you, but I realized I might be making some assumptions. Is ‘she’ and ‘hers’ okay or should I be using another set of pronouns to refer to you?”

**Example 4.** You are facilitating a meeting with people who are familiar with each other. “Good morning, everyone. I know that in some of our past meetings we have shared both our names and our personal pronouns, and we've discussed a bit about why pronouns matter. Even though we all know each other already, I thought it would be a good opportunity for us to share again what names and pronouns we are currently going by, just to remind ourselves that these things can change over time, and we want to get it right and make this an inclusive space. Feel free to share whatever you are comfortable with. My name is still ‘Dana’ and I am still going by ‘he’ and ‘him’ pronouns.”

*If someone else makes what you believe was a mistake:*

**Example 5.** You are talking with an acquaintance about a mutual work friend, Nikhil. Nikhil has told you they only go by “they/them” pronouns. “Oh yeah, Nikhil gave me his book to borrow last weekend.” You might respond in a few possible ways. One might be: “Oh? What book did they give you?” This gentle reinforcement could be better than saying “Oh, Nikhil goes by ‘they/them’ pronouns” for several reasons -- Nikhil might not have discussed that with your acquaintance, and the acquaintance might feel put into a corner or not understand much about pronouns. Depending on the relationships you have, there could be an educational conversation. You might also wonder whether Nikhil is consistently wanting “they/them” pronouns in all contexts or if they are only telling that to certain people. That’s why sometimes simply responding to conversations using what you understand to be the correct pronouns can be more helpful than other approaches. Of course, if Nikhil has told you they want you to actively correct other people, go for the educational approach!

**Example 6.** You are facilitating a workshop in the community with people who mostly don’t know each other, although they are friendly and care about diversity and inclusion. You’ve had a brief discussion about pronouns and included respecting pronouns in your community agreements, and people shared their names and most shared their pronouns at the beginning of the workshop. Later, one workshop participant says “Oh, I really agree with her comment. I also think...” but the person being referred to as “her” actually had earlier said that they go by “they” pronouns. There are many ways you could respond, but one might be speaking to the room: “Maria earlier mentioned they go by ‘they’ pronouns. I know for a lot of folks in this room these concepts about pronouns may seem new or it’s easy to forget them and revert to the assumptions we’ve been programmed to make, but it’s important that we work on this to get it right for folks, just as we’d want to make sure we call people by the right names. I’m happy to chat with anyone during the break who isn’t sure how to do this or what it means or anyone who simply wants to practice. Thanks for your affirmation of Maria’s comment, Dominique, I agree that they really were on point with that one.”

Now that you have some ideas about how to respond when someone makes a mistake, let’s talk about how you can share your own personal pronouns (/sharing).



# Sharing Your Pronouns

## HOW DO I SHARE MY PERSONAL PRONOUNS?

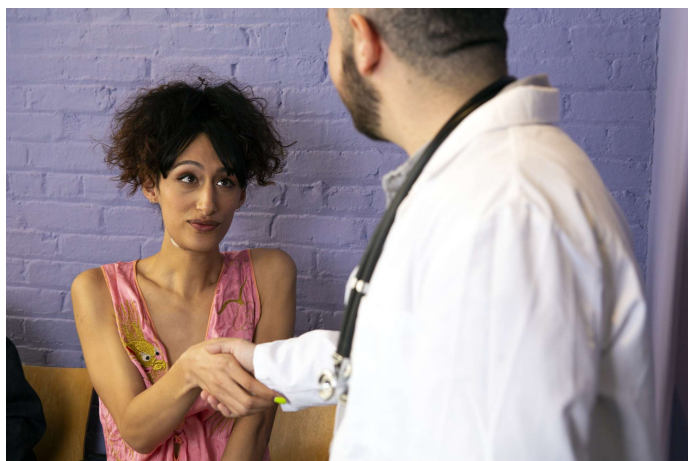
The vast majority of people go by the pronouns sets “he/him” or “she/her.” A small but increasing number of people use “they/them” pronouns or another pronouns set -- sometimes simply because they don’t want to go by pronouns with a gender association (just as some folks go by “Ms.” whether or not they are married, because they don’t think their marital status should be a relevant issue), and sometimes people use pronouns that aren’t associated with one of those two most common (binary) genders because they are nonbinary (i.e. people who are neither exclusively a man nor exclusively a woman -- e.g. genderqueer, agender, bigender, fluid, third/additional gender in a cultural tradition, etc.).

Please note that many nonbinary people identify with the word “trans” (short for “transgender”), but that some do not; and many people who are trans are also men or women (binary). All people, whether they are trans or not trans (cisgender), whether they are men or women or nonbinary -- all people can choose to go by whichever sets of pronouns they are most comfortable with.



So, a great way to create and normalize space for people to share their pronouns is first to share your own. You can do this by saying, for example, “**Hi, my name is Farida and I go by the pronoun ‘she’**” or “**I’m Yoshi and I’m referred to by ‘he/him’ pronouns.**” See also the various pronoun sets (/how) people might use to describe themselves.

Sharing your own pronouns is a great idea, but it isn’t requisite. Keep in mind, however, that there is a privilege of appearing in a way that fits both your gender and the pronouns that many people associate with your gender. In other words, if people’s assumptions are correct, never having to name those assumptions begins to normalize the very process of making assumptions (which for others may be incorrect). Thus, sharing pronouns is a great way to disrupt the normalization and privilege of assumption.



If you are attending an event, you can write on your name tag the pronouns that you go by in the corner, near your name. Sometimes the pronoun alone is sufficient (e.g. “she”), though sometimes it is helpful if there is space to write “pronouns” first before listing which pronouns you go by (e.g. “**Pronouns: he or they**” -- note that some people are open to be referred to by multiple different sets of pronouns, as in this

example).

If you are writing an email, you could include your pronouns in your signature line. You could also include a link to this website or another resource that helps people reading your email to understand why you are listing your pronouns. (e.g. write: “**Pronouns: they/them ~ See [www.pronouns.org](http://www.pronouns.org) (/home) to learn more.**”)

You can also share your own pronouns by sharing a link to the pronoun you go by. Here are some of the more common ones:

- <http://pronouns.org/she> (<http://mypronouns.org/she>)
- <http://pronouns.org/he> (<http://mypronouns.org/he>)
- <http://pronouns.org/they> (<http://mypronouns.org/they>)
- <http://pronouns.org/ze> (<http://mypronouns.org/ze>)

- <http://pronouns.org/neopronouns> (<http://mypronouns.org/neopronouns>)

If you use business cards, you can also include your pronouns, usually near or below your name, for example:

**Jamaal Johnson**

*Pronouns: he/him*

OR

**Jamaal Johnson** (*pronoun: he*)

There is no singular way to list and share pronouns. Many people say, for example, “she/her/hers” or “she/her” or just “she” and it’s generally understood that this refers to a larger set of pronouns (e.g. that includes “herself”) without having to list every one of those pronouns. You'll also find on our resources page (</resources>) links to additional resources and items that one can get to assist in sharing pronouns.

When you share your pronouns, you may find that you get questions about what that this means or why you are sharing your pronouns. It may be very helpful to review the other sections of this website so that you will feel comfortable explaining the purpose of sharing pronouns.

Now that you understand how to share your own pronouns, let's discuss how to ask other people their personal pronouns (</asking>).

# Asking Others Their Pronouns



## HOW DO I ASK SOMEONE THEIR PERSONAL PRONOUNS?

First, make sure that you have shared your own pronouns (/sharing) and know how to use others' pronouns correctly (/how). Doing so is the best way to encourage other people to share their pronouns, to help make them more comfortable to share their pronouns with you.

If you are meeting someone new one-to-one, you might say something like: “Hi, I’m Akeem, and I go by ‘they’ pronouns. **How should I refer to you?**” Of course, if you are meeting someone who isn’t familiar with sharing personal pronouns, be prepared to explain that people often make assumptions about whether someone goes by “he” or “she” or another set of pronouns (e.g. “they” or “ze”) based on their appearance, and that the only way to really know how someone will feel respected is to ask what pronouns they go by. Usually offering up that the vast majority of people either go by “he” or by “she” helps indicate to the other person what the typical response is that they might give.

**We don’t recommend ever forcing people to share their pronouns.** However, people could be invited or encouraged to do so. That is what we mean by “asking” — it’s about invitation. In a group setting where you are a leader, here is one example of how you could conduct a round of introductions:

“Welcome to our meeting. **Before we begin, we’d like to go around and share our names and personal pronouns.** For those who haven’t done this before, this is a way that we can avoid assumptions, particularly about gender. What may seem obvious may actually be incorrect, and please keep in mind that while many people associate “he” or “she” as meaning men or women, respectively, this isn’t always the case.



This is not about sharing your gender or private information, that is not what I’m asking for. I’m only asking for which pronouns you want to be referred to by, because these are a part of the English language in how we typically refer to people. So, for most people, that means they either go by 'she' and 'her' pronouns or they go by 'he' and 'him' pronouns. Some people go by 'they' and 'them' pronouns or another set of pronouns or another way of being referred to. However, for most people in this room you’d simply say something like 'Hi, I’m Lesley and I go by "he" pronouns' or 'Hi, I’m Jamie and I go by "she" pronouns' and then turn to the next person. If you don’t understand what I’m asking, or if you feel that you are uncomfortable sharing or unable to participate in a respectful way, it’s okay to just share your name. But if you feel comfortable to share, and you know that typically you go by a certain set of pronouns and are good with that, let us know. Please also keep in mind that what people in this room share today is just what people are sharing today in this space and time, and that people may change their names or pronouns or go by different ones in another space. Does anyone have a question before we begin our introductions?”

Please note that it may be helpful to also have a conversation with the group about how to utilize various pronouns correctly (particularly pronouns sets they may be less familiar with), perhaps also referring them to this website or other resources.

For additional ideas, be sure to check out the additional links and videos on our resources page (</resources>).

# Inclusive Language

## HOW DO I USE GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

This reference is meant to provide you with very basic pointers and replacement language to help avoid gender assumptions in your language. Although you might not mean harm, using language that assumes another person's gender or pronouns (if that person has not shared the gender or pronouns to use) can cause harm, as can using language that erases some people's genders by implying there are only two genders (or that only a certain gender is qualified to do a particular job).

Many people have already made the shift in their language to avoid "that's so gay" as a derogatory phrase or to avoid assumptions about sexual orientation (e.g. asking a woman if she has a boyfriend). Many people have stopped using "he" as a universal language to refer to all people, or to exclusive "he" language or "she" language to refer to all fire fighters, all flight attendants, all doctors, all nurses, all administrative assistants, all college students, etc.

Similarly, we need to shift our language to avoid further assumptions that particularly harm transgender and gender nonconforming people. Small changes in language can make a big difference in peoples lives.

Instead of "yes, sir" or "thank you, ma'am" or other language that makes gender-based assumptions, you could simply communicate:

- Good morning!
- Thank you very much.

- It's a pleasure.
- How can I be of assistance today?
- Could I help the next guest?
- Yes, please.
- Yes, absolutely. Coming right up.

Instead of calling upon or remarking about a particular “man” or “woman” (who has not disclosed that identity), you could indicate:

- The person in the red shirt
- The person with their hand raised
- The person who just spoke
- The person over here (gesturing)

Instead of “ladies and gentlemen” or “boys and girls” or other language that assumes only two genders, you could use:

- Friends
- Colleagues
- Friends and colleagues
- Esteemed guests
- Children / Youngsters
- Students

Instead of “he or she” or “s/he” (when speaking of an unknown or universal person) you could communicate:

- They
- That person
- The patron
- The guest

It is fine to use singular pronoun “they” as a way to refer to a specific person who goes by the pronoun “they” or to colloquially refer to a single person of unspecified gender. However, it may not be the best choice of language for a policy or technical writing in which a reference to a single person must be absolutely clear. In this case, instead of writing “he or she” or “s/he” or even “he/she/they” or “they,” it may be best to instead simply repeat the noun: the complainant, the representative, the member, the person, etc. That way, there is total policy clarity. There are also ways to edit sentences to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Instead of “men and women,” you could communicate (depending on what you mean to construe):

- Everyone
- All people
- People of all genders
- Women, men, and nonbinary people