

A Guide to Pronouns

Pronouns are a part of the way we speak. They take the place of people's names when we are speaking about them. The most commonly used singular pronouns are she and he. Most of the time a person using these pronouns decides on which one to use based on the way the person they are speaking about looks. This can cause a lot of harm because we cannot tell someone's gender by the way they look. Also, even if we know someone's gender, they might use different pronouns than what we assume. The problem is making assumptions. The best way to find out what pronouns to use for a person is to ask them.

Asking for someone's pronouns:

- You can ask them "What pronouns do you use?"
- You can lead by example "My name is _____ and my pronouns are ___ and _____. What are your name and pronouns?"
- If you are unfamiliar with the pronouns that they give, you can ask how to use them. However, self-education is an important part of being an ally. Getting to know the pronouns below and how to use them is a good first step in educating yourself.
- If you are leading a group, you can suggest that everyone include their pronouns in their introduction. You can also tell them why it is important to do this. It is also good to use inclusive language in any documents you may use in your group. Terms such as people, folks, students, staff, everybody are more inclusive than gendered language such as boys and girls, he or she. If your documents require the person to share their gender, you should first consider whether this is absolutely necessary. If it is, a blank space allows the person to use whatever language they would like. If you are including examples, be sure to have examples that are inclusive of trans and non-binary people such as "Mx" as an option accompanying "Ms, Mrs, and Mr."
- Be aware: Asking for pronouns only from people whose gender expression doesn't conform to gender norms can make them feel isolated and can leave out people including trans and non-binary people whose gender expression seems to you to fit norms. The best thing to do is to ask everyone to share their pronouns if they are comfortable or to just use people's names. If someone doesn't understand why you are asking, you can let them know that you prefer to ask instead of assume. If you are comfortable, you can share with them how asking for pronouns avoids hurting people.
- Do not ask questions about the person's body, their gender, their medical history, whether they have come out to others, other names they may have used, their sex lives, or any other invasive questions.

Language is always evolving and more inclusive pronouns are just one example. However, transphobia is everywhere in our culture. Some people use grammar as an excuse for continuing transphobic behaviour. While it can be fun to learn about the difference between prescriptivism and descriptivism in linguistics and about the history of the evolution of then English language, the most important thing is treating everyone respectfully, which is more important than grammar.

A Short List of Pronouns

There are all sorts of pronouns that people use. The list below contains a few examples but is not comprehensive. People choose the pronouns that they are most comfortable with and inventing new pronouns can be very validating. For a more comprehensive list of pronouns, visit <http://askanonbinary.tumblr.com/general>.

	Subject Pronoun (Nominative)	Object Pronoun (Objective)	Possessive Determiner	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive Pronoun
Co ¹	<i>Co</i> skipped.	I love <i>co</i> .	<i>Cos</i> nose scrunched.	That is <i>cos</i> .	<i>Co</i> loves <i>coself</i> .
E ²	<i>E</i> hopped.	I spoke to <i>em</i> .	<i>Eir</i> face is wide.	That is <i>eirs</i> .	<i>E</i> loves <i>emself</i> .
He	<i>He</i> fell.	I don't know <i>him</i> .	<i>His</i> hair grew.	That is <i>his</i> .	<i>He</i> loves <i>himself</i> .
Name only	<i>Vivek</i> ran.	I ran with <i>Maqdas</i> .	<i>Evan's</i> lips trembled.	That is <i>Judith's</i> .	Jesús loves <i>Jesús</i> .
She	<i>She</i> ran.	I know <i>her</i> .	<i>Her</i> books fell.	That is <i>hers</i> .	<i>She</i> loves <i>herself</i> .
They ³	<i>They</i> are running.	I talked to <i>them</i> .	<i>Their</i> voice boomed.	That is <i>theirs</i> .	<i>They</i> love <i>themselves</i> .
Ze and Hir ⁴	<i>Ze</i> jumped.	I like <i>hir</i> .	<i>Hir</i> eyes sparkle.	That is <i>hirs</i> .	<i>Ze</i> loves <i>hirsself</i> .

¹ 'Co' rhymes with 'go' and 'cos' rhymes with 'goes'.

² 'E' is pronounced like the letter. The rest rhyme with the corresponding 'They' category.

³ 'They' pronouns are still conjugated in the third person when used in the second person for subject and reflexive pronouns. When speaking about one person using 'they' pronouns, you would not say "They is running" or "They loves themselves."

⁴ 'Ze' rhymes with 'me' and 'hir' is pronounced like 'hear'.

Tips:

- Learning unfamiliar pronouns can take practice. However, it can be painful for the person you are speaking about to hear you use the wrong pronouns. A good way to make fewer mistakes is to practice by yourself. Speak about the person out loud in a private setting until you are comfortable using the person's pronouns in all sorts of ways.
- If you do make a mistake, apologize, correct yourself, and move on. Going on about how bad you feel can put the person you're speaking about in the position of trying to make you feel better. If you are making lots of mistakes, you need more practice on

your own. You can try www.practicewithpronouns.com. Try filling in the blanks and then reading the sentences aloud.

- If someone else makes a mistake, you can try correcting them. You might say “Kayne actually uses they/them pronouns and I’m excited for their party too.” This corrects the speaker without excluding them permanently. We all make mistakes and this approach called ‘calling in’ helps people to feel that they need to fix their mistake but that they are still a part of the group. You can read about the differences between calling in and calling out at <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/calling-in-and-calling-out/>
- If someone is always or deliberately making mistakes, don’t assume that you know the best way to deal with it. Part of being an ally is to support the person or group that is being oppressed. Seek guidance from the person you want to support. Ask them if they would like to you intervene and what they would like you to do.
- Pronouns can be incorporated into the online world as well. Including your pronouns in your email signature or profile can be a way of reminding people not to assume what they are. However, if you are not trans, what is more important is not making assumptions about other people. Asking for people’s pronouns and speaking in ways that do not assume the pronouns of people you don’t know is more important than an email signature.

Remember:

- People may change which pronouns they use over the course of their lives.
- Some people use more than one set of pronouns.
- Many people change their names (both first and last). Trans and non-binary people may change their names as well as their pronouns. The same guiding principles apply to being respectful when using someone’s name.
- Most people simply ask for a person’s pronouns. While it used to be more common for people to ask for someone’s “preferred pronouns,” this makes it seem like using them is optional and can insinuate that they are not the person’s *real* pronouns. Each of us gets to choose how we would like to be addressed and those are our real pronouns.

Resources

<http://askanonbinary.tumblr.com/general>

<https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/calling-in-and-calling-out/>

<https://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns-app/>

www.practicewithpronouns.com

<http://www.pronouns.failedslacker.com/>

<http://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>