

# GENDER PRONOUNS

## What They Are and Why They Matter

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### What Are Pronouns?

Pronouns are the words we use in place of an individual's proper name. Examples include "she/her/hers," "he/him/his," and "they/them/theirs." Some people use specific pronouns, while others are comfortable with any pronouns. Some people use additional pronouns called Neo-pronouns, such as "ze/hir/hirs." If you have questions and want to learn more about neo-pronouns, visit [MyPronouns.org](https://MyPronouns.org) as a resource that goes into more depth.

### Why Do Pronouns Matter?

Pronouns are very important, especially for people who are transgender – an umbrella term encompassing those whose gender identities differ from those typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth ([American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org)). Using a transgender person's correct or incorrect pronouns is the most common way to affirm or dismiss their gender. Asking for and affirmatively using the correct pronouns can be an important signal of respect and understanding. Being referred to by the incorrect pronoun can be damaging to a person or make them feel written off as invisible.

### How Do I Know Someone's Pronouns?

The only way to know what pronouns a person uses is to ask them. Pronouns cannot be assumed by a person's name, or outward appearance. Don't be afraid to ask what pronouns a person uses.

### Why Do People Use They/Them/Theirs Pronouns?

Increasingly, members of the LGBTQ community are using "they/them/theirs" pronouns. People who are transgender, genderqueer, or nonbinary may be most comfortable with "they/them/theirs." This can be because they do not identify as either male or female – but rather somewhere else on the gender spectrum. "They/them/theirs" is a gender-neutral pronoun and can be used singularly to describe one person. For example, "Ivy lives in Greenville, and they are the next person to deliver testimony on the legislation."

### Tips for Sharing Pronouns

It may feel uncomfortable to ask a person's pronouns, but it's a good practice to treat pronouns as a critical part of any introduction. Share your own pronouns, then simply ask how the person you're speaking to would like to be referred to. For example, "Hi, my name is Bob, and I use he/him/his pronouns. What is your name, and what pronouns do you use?" You should share your pronouns and ask for others' pronouns regardless of how a person looks or sounds; do not assume a person's gender or pronouns by appearance and sound.

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## What is Misgendering?

Misgendering refers to instances when one person labels another person as a gender other than the one they identify as. This can include using the incorrect pronoun, referring to someone as “sir” or “ma’am,” or using gendered descriptors such as “the young lady,” “the gentleman,” etc.

## What If I Make a Mistake or Misgender Someone?

It’s OK to make mistakes while you’re learning. What’s most important is that you are trying to learn and do better. When you make a mistake with someone’s pronouns, it can be tempting to gloss over the mistake or overcorrect yourself by unloading guilty feelings on an LGBTQ person, because it can be uncomfortable for both parties involved – but please do not do either of these. Instead, take accountability for the mistake and continue using the correct pronoun.

The best practice when you make a mistake is to quickly acknowledge the mistake, offer a brief apology, correct the mistake, and keep the conversation moving forward.

For example, “Next up is Taylor, she is a student from Columbia.” [You are corrected because Taylor uses they/them/theirs pronouns.] “Sorry. Taylor is up next – they are a student from Columbia.” or “Thank you – my apologies. Taylor is up next – they are a student from Columbia.”

Keep in mind that the person who you misgendered may have a strong reaction to the misuse of their pronouns and need some time or space to recenter and recover.

## How Can I Better Communicate Support for Folks’ Pronouns?

People who are not transgender, genderqueer, or nonbinary can often set the tone of a conversation or interaction and signal basic respect by sharing their own pronouns first. Consider adding your pronouns to your email signature. Write your pronouns on your nametag. Change your Zoom or video meeting display name to include your pronouns, such as “Mary Smith (she/hers).” When you begin speaking in a meeting, introduce yourself with your name, your pronouns, and any other necessary identifying information.

## Other Tips for Gender-Neutral Language

Put thought into other ways that you address a group of people whose pronouns you haven’t been told. For example, try using gender-neutral language such as “siblings,” “residents,” “folks,” “y’all” or “all” instead of “brothers and sisters,” “you guys,” “ladies,” “ma’am,” or “sir.” Instead of assuming a stranger’s gender identity or pronouns, use descriptive language: “Yes, it looks like there’s a question from the person in the red T-shirt with black hair,” rather than “a question from the lady in front.”

Remember that practice makes perfect. Practice using pronouns, get used to sharing your own pronouns, and be OK with making mistakes. Eventually, this will come naturally and you’ll be consistently taking an important step toward treating everyone with decency and respect.