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Pronouns - A How To Guide

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee LGBT Resource Center

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Subject: ____[1]____ laughed at the notion of a gender binary.

Object: They tried to convince ___[2]___ that asexuality does not exist.

Possessive: ___[3]___ favorite color is unknown.

Possessive Pronoun: The pronoun card is ____[4]___ .

Reflexive: ____[1]____ thinks highly of ____[5]___ .

The pronoun list on the reverse is not an exhaustive list. It is good practice to ask which pronouns a person uses.

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1	2	3	4	5
e/ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
he	him	his	his	himself
[name]	[name]	[name]'s	[name]'s	[name]'s self
per	per	pers	pers	perself
she	her	her	hers	herself
sie	sir	hir	hirs	hirself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
ve	ver	vis	vers	verself
zie	zim	zir	zirs	zirself

Gender Neutral / Gender Inclusive Pronouns

A gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun is a pronoun that does not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed.

Some languages, such as English, do not have a gender neutral or third gender pronoun available, and this has been criticized, since in many instances, writers, speakers, etc. use "he/his" when referring to a generic individual in the third person. Also, the dichotomy of "he and she" in English does not leave room for other gender identities, which is a source of frustration to the transgender and gender queer communities.

People who are limited by languages that do not include gender-neutral pronouns have attempted to create them, in the interest of greater equality.

HE/SHE	HIM/HER	HIS/HER	HIS/HERS	HIMSELF/HERSELF
zie	zim	zir	zirs	zirself
sie	sir	hir	hirs	hirself
ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
ve	ver	vis	vers	verself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
per	per	pers	pers	perself

History of Gender Inclusive Pronouns

Native English Pronouns

"Ou, a": Native English Gender-Neutral Pronouns. According to Dennis Baron's Grammar and Gender:

> In 1789, William H. Marshall records the existence of a dialectal English
> epicene pronoun, singular ou: "'Ou will' expresses
> either *he* will, *she* will, or *it* will." Marshall traces ou to Middle English
> epicene a, used by the fourteenth-century English writer John of Trevisa,
> and both the OED and Wright's English Dialect Dictionary confirm the use of
> a for *he, she, it, they,* and even *I*.
>
> The dialectal epicene pronoun a is a reduced form of the Old and Middle
> English masculine and feminine pronouns *he* and *heo*. By the twelfth and
> thirteenth centuries, the masculine and feminine pronouns had developed to
> a point where, according to the OED, they were "almost or wholly
> indistinguishable in pronunciation." The modern feminine pronoun *she*, which
> first appears in the mid twelfth century, seems to have been drafted at
> least partly to reduce the increasing ambiguity of the pronoun system....

He goes on to describe how relics of these sex-neutral terms survive in some British dialects of Modern English, and sometimes a pronoun of one gender might be applied to a person or animal of the opposite gender.

Language Authorities

"One"

In 1770, Robert Baker suggested use of "one, ones" instead of "one, his", since there was no equivalent "one, hers". Others shared this sentiment in 1868, 1884, 1979, and even now. Others throughout this period disagreed, finding it too pedantic.

"His or Her" vs. Singular "They"

Around 1795, the language authorities Lindley Murray, Joseph Priestly, and Hugh Blair, amongst others, campaigned against pronoun irregularities in pronoun use, such as lack of agreement in gender and number. Without coining words, this can only be done in the third person singular by use of compound terms like "his or her". Grammarians in 1879, 1922, 1931, 1957, and the 1970s have accepted "they" as a singular term that could be used in place of "he" or "he or she", though sometimes limiting it to informal constructions. Others in 1795, 1825, 1863, 1898, 1926, and 1982 argued against it for various reasons. And whatever the grammarians might argue, people have been using the singular "they" for about the last 600 years, though (as mentioned earlier) it can only be applied in certain cases. If new gender-neutral pronouns are not adopted, I'm sure that singular "they" will still be a point of contention for centuries to come. For further information on the use of singular "their" throughout the centuries, see the [large body of information]() that Henry Churchyard has compiled on the subject.

Frequently Asked Questions

Pronoun FAQ

<u>What if I make a mistake?</u>
It's okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like "Sorry, I meant she." If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on.
A lot of the time it can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right. But please, don't! It is inappropriate and makes the person who was mis-gendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you, which is absolutely not their job.
It is your job to remember people's PGPs. Taking an active role
In your classes, you may hear one of your students using the wrong pronoun for someone. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been mis-gendered. This means saying something like "Actually, Xena uses the pronoun she," and then moving on. If other students or faculty are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let your student know that you are their ally.
It may be appropriate to approach them and say something like "I noticed that you were getting referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier, and I know that that can be really hurtful. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your personal pronoun? I want to make sure that this group is a safe space for you." Follow up if necessary, but take your cues from the comfort level of your student. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.

<u>How do I ask someone what pronouns they use?</u>
Try asking: "What pronouns do you use?" or "Can you remind me what pronouns you use?" It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as getting it wrong or making a hurtful assumption.
If you are asking as part of an introduction exercise and you want to quickly explain what a PGP is, you can try something like this: "Tell us your name, where you come from, and your personal pronoun. That means the pronoun that you use in reference to yourself. For example, I'm Xena, I'm from Amazon Island, and I like to be referred to with she, her, and hers pronouns. So you could say, 'she went to her car' if you were talking about me."

<u>Why is it important to respect people's pronouns?</u>
You can't always know what someone's PGP is by looking at them. Asking and correctly using someone's personal pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity.
When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above.)
It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else's gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive.

<u>What are some commonly used pronouns?</u>
She, her, hers and he, him, his are the most commonly used pronouns. Some people call these "female/feminine" and "male/masculine" pronouns, but many avoid these labels because, for example, not everyone who uses he feels like a "male" or "masculine."
There are also lots of gender-neutral pronouns in use. Here are a few you might hear:
They, them, theirs (Xena ate their food because they were hungry.) This is a pretty common gender-neutral pronoun…. And yes, it can in fact be used in the singular.

Ze, hir (Xena ate hir food because ze was hungry.) Ze is pronounced like "zee" can also be spelled zie or xe, and replaces she/he/they. Hir is pronounced like "here" and replaces her/hers/him/his/they/theirs.

Just my name please! (Xena ate Xena's food because Xena was hungry) Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all, using their name as a pronoun instead.

Never, ever refer to a person as "it" or "he-she" (unless they specifically ask you to.) These are offensive slurs used against trans and gender non-conforming individuals.

What are "personal gender pronouns"?
A "personal gender pronoun" (or PGP) is the pronoun that a person uses for themself.
For example: If Xena's personal pronouns are she, her, and hers, you could say "Xena ate her food because she was hungry."

What is a pronoun?
A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (like I or you) or someone or something that is being talked about (like she, it, them, and this). Gender pronouns (like he and hers) specifically refer to people that you are talking about.