

A GUIDE TO PRONOUN USAGE

Pronouns are important—probably more important than many of us think. Pronouns are words used to replace someone’s name or title, and in English, some are marked for gender. Some people use gendered pronouns for themselves, others do not. Because of this, when we use pronouns to identify a person, we may be unintentionally making an assumption about that person’s gender that differs from their gender identity or expression.

Using someone’s pronouns correctly is important because it shows that you respect them, and it is affirming to be acknowledged as the correct gender. This guide is a starting point for how to use people’s personal pronouns correctly and respectfully.

What is a pronoun?

A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (e.g., I, you) or someone or something that is being talked about (e.g., she, it, them, this). Gender pronouns (e.g., he, her, they) specifically refer to the person being talked about.

What is a “personal gender pronoun”?

A “personal gender pronoun” (or PGP) is the pronoun or set of pronouns that a person uses for themselves. For example, if Casey’s personal pronouns are he, him, and his, you would say, “Casey ate his food because he was hungry.”

Why is it important to respect people’s pronouns?

If someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, or alienated (or any combination of the three). However, you can’t always know what someone’s PGP is by looking at them. The simplest way to respect someone’s gender identity is by asking for and correctly using their personal pronouns.

But remember, just like sexual orientation, a person’s gender identity can be a very personal and private thing. No one should feel pressured to share how they identify. If someone chooses to not to share, that’s okay.

How do I know or ask someone which pronouns to use?

If the person you are referring to is a stranger or brief acquaintance (a server, cashier, etc.), you likely don’t need to know their pronouns. If the person is someone you’re in more regular contact with—such as a classmate, student, or coworker—it is best to ask them what their pronouns are in private when it is appropriate. To start this conversation, you can say any of the following:

- “What pronouns do you use?”
- “How would you like me to refer to you?”
- “Can you remind me what pronouns you use?”
- “How would you like to be addressed?”
- “My name is _____, and my pronouns are _____, _____, and _____. What about you?”

It may feel uncomfortable at first, but the person you’re asking will most likely appreciate your effort. You can also ask about pronouns as part of a group exercise, which allows everyone to easily learn each other’s pronouns. To normalize pronoun sharing, try making pronouns an optional part of name tags and signature lines!

What if I make a mistake?

It's okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. If you use the wrong pronoun, apologize, correct yourself, and move on. An example of this is, "Her books are—I'm sorry, their books are over there." If you forget someone's pronouns, follow the same protocol: apologize, ask what their pronouns are, and move on. If you realize later that you made a mistake, you can briefly apologize in private. Try saying something like, "I'm sorry for using the wrong pronoun earlier. I'll be more careful next time."

By correcting yourself, you're modeling respectful pronoun use for others and helping yourself remember for next time.

When should I correct others?

If someone—such as other students, faculty, or staff—is using the wrong pronoun for another person, you can ask that person how you can support them. Sometimes people want others' help; sometimes they want to handle the situation on their own. If someone uses the wrong pronoun for a person who isn't present and you have permission to help, you can correct them and then carry on with the conversation: for example, "Actually, Sam uses the pronoun she. But yes! I'm going to her presentation too!"

If someone continues to use the wrong pronouns for someone else even after being corrected, it may help to ask the misidentified individual if they would like you to take that person aside and remind them of the proper pronoun. Steps like this let misidentified person know that you support them.



It can be challenging to remember pronouns at first, but the only solution is to practice! Correct pronoun use is a simple step toward showing respect for people of every gender. Below are just a few common pronoun sets that you can learn and practice.

	Nominative (subject)	Objective (object)	Possessive determiner	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
He	<i>He</i> laughed	I called <i>him</i>	<i>His</i> dog barks	That is <i>his</i>	He likes <i>himself</i>
She	<i>She</i> laughed	I called <i>her</i>	<i>Her</i> dog barks	That is <i>hers</i>	She likes <i>herself</i>
They	<i>They</i> laughed	I called <i>them</i>	<i>Their</i> dog barks	That is <i>theirs</i>	They like <i>themselves</i>
Per	<i>Per</i> laughed	I called <i>per</i>	<i>Per</i> dog barks	That is <i>pers</i>	Per likes <i>perself</i>
Ze and hir (see/hear)	<i>Ze</i> laughed)	I called <i>hir</i>	<i>Hir</i> dog barks	That is <i>hirs</i>	<i>Ze</i> likes <i>hirsself</i>