

Pronouns: Why they're important and how to use them



You've probably heard about pronouns, maybe in grammar class or maybe in the context of gender identity. And you've definitely used pronouns without even realizing it, even for yourself.

According to Merriam Webster, **pronouns** are the third person personal pronouns (such as *he/him*, *she/her*, and *they/them*) that a person goes by.

While you don't usually talk about yourself in the third person, you definitely talk about other people that way. You might say something like, "my mom is making a cake this evening and **she's** really excited about it", or "my coworker Tad is supposed to be here for a meeting, but **he** let me know he's running late" or "my best friend has a cute that **they** talk about all the time!" (yes, they can be a pronoun for one person...we'll talk about why later, but Merriam Webster says so too.)

What do pronouns do?

- They give other people information about what pronouns the people you are talking about use for themselves (if you're using the correct pronouns for that person)
- They can show respect for the person you're talking about

They do not:

- Necessarily imply a person's gender identity
- Make a political statement

Table of Contents

Let's talk about gender!

- [How can I visualize gender?](#)

So... pronouns.

- [Commonly used pronouns](#)
- [Less commonly used/neopronouns](#)
- [Split Pronouns](#)

Practical Pronoun Advice

- [Practice, practice, practice](#)
- [Making mistakes](#)
 - [Correct ways to do this:](#)
 - [Incorrect ways to do this:](#)
- [Deadnames](#)
- [Asking for pronouns](#)

Towards more inclusive language: Gender neutrality in practice

Helpful Links for Terms, Explanations, and Other Things

Let's talk about gender!

People often talk about gender as though it is defined by your biological sex, but in reality the two are different elements of who you are. Even biological sex is something that isn't 100% set in stone: there are intersex people who may have physical and biological characteristics of both sexes.

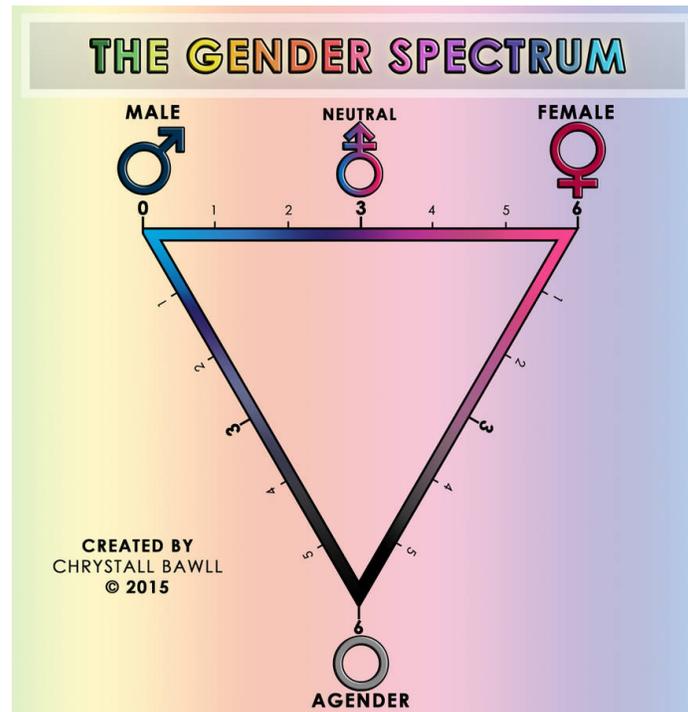
When a child is born, a doctor decides whether that child is considered male or female. We often talk about someone's birth gender by saying they are "assigned __ at birth." However, as we see happen sometimes, someone may start to identify with a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth.

[There are so many ways to have \(or not have, that's an option too\) a gender!](#) Let's walk through some of the more common ones, and remember, gender is an expression of a person's identity, and there is no "correct" way to have a gender.

- **Cisgender (cis)** = gender identity matches sex assigned at birth
- **Transgender (trans)** = gender identity is anything other than cis, including binary trans individuals and nonbinary people. Generally trans people no longer fully identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
- **Nonbinary:** any gender that falls outside of a colonial understanding of gender, which is usually a binary gender spectrum. This can include terms like third gender, agender, two-spirit, etc.
- **Gender nonconforming:** someone who uses the gender binary, but expresses it in nontraditional ways. This can include examples like
 - Men in skirts, wearing make-up
 - Women dressing in long gym shorts, not wearing make-up
 - Feminine men and masculine women
 - Any subversion of patriarchal gender norms

Is gender a spectrum? Is gender a graph? Is gender an outfit? How can I visualize gender?

Sometimes when people think of gender, they think of a line with two points and perhaps your gender identity is at one end...or maybe in the middle. People don't always think about points that might be, say, off the graph. That's why we really like this **Gender Spectrum** graphic! It can help you understand the many ways in which gender-- or lack thereof, which is called "agender"--might exist.



Some other points about gender:

- Appearance does not dictate gender...for lots of reasons!
 - Anti-feminine bias in western culture
 - Clothes are built for binary bodies
 - Each person determines their own sense of functionality and how they contribute, and their appearance dictates that
- Kids begin forming gender ideas around 4 or 5 years old, so it's perfectly possible to have a trans and nonbinary child self-identify at that age or even younger.
- Many LGBTQ+ people, particularly feminine people, have a complex relationship with gender because gender standards often prioritize the experience of a cis, heterosexual man...even standards that relate to women.

So... pronouns.

Once again, pronouns are representative of how someone wants to be referred to in the third person. This can give other people awareness on how someone wants to be perceived or how someone wants other people to think about them. This is **extremely important** and should never be dismissed as “just a preference,” a “phase,” or unimportant. If a pronoun is changing, it’s because something about the person themselves is changing. It may also be that a person feels safe enough to come out to you.

Because of this, the term “preferred pronouns” is not the best way to talk about pronouns. It’s not a preference: it’s an identity. “Pronouns” or “personal pronouns” are fine.

Pronouns equal respect as well. You wouldn’t want to make a mistake in how to refer to someone, right? For instance, unless your doctor says, “hey, call me by my first name”, you’d probably err on the side of saying “Doctor Lastname” or, even better, asking what the doctor wants you to call them. Pronouns are much the same, but they’re not something you can assume--more on that later.

Commonly used pronouns

-**he/him**: often, but not always, used by male-identifying individuals

-**she/her**: often, but not always, used by female-identifying individuals

-**they/them**: often, but not always, used by nonbinary people as a gender-neutral pronoun. The singular “they” to refer to one person of unspecified gender has been around for...[a while](#). Also like singular *you*, singular *they* is treated as a grammatical plural and uses the plural forms of verbs.

Less commonly used/neopronouns

Occasionally, someone might come up with their own set of pronouns to connote something about their gender identity or neutrality. Some people have also tried to create a gender neutral pronoun for English other than they: some examples of these might be “ze/zir”, “xe/xir” or “sie”. If you meet someone who uses a pronoun you haven’t seen before, ask them how to pronounce it and for a (short) demonstration.

Split Pronouns

Sometimes people use two different sets of pronouns. If someone has a split set of pronouns (he/they, she/they, they/ze), the first pronoun in the set may be used more often than the second pronoun in the set, but do try to use both pronouns. For ease of reference, simply switch by sentence (i.e., for someone (he/they), use “he” in one sentence, “they” in the next, and so forth). You can ask the person--briefly and with respect--about any guidance they might have about when to use what pronoun, but they are not obligated to answer.

Practical Pronoun Advice

Practice, practice, practice

If someone uses a gender-neutral pronoun, a neopronoun, or a non-binary pronoun, or even just has updated their pronoun, find a way to use this in writing and speech at LEAST 3 times to practice. The more you practice, the more naturally this will come. Eventually, this may lead to a shift in the way you understand gender! Here's some easy ways to practice pronouns that are new to you.

- Talk about that person to your cat/dog and refer to them with the correct pronoun
- When you make a mistake, simply correct it and make sure to practice using it elsewhere
- Write notes about that person using the correct pronouns

Making mistakes

It happens - when someone corrects you or you notice that you've misgendered someone, simply acknowledge your mistake. Don't make a big deal out of it and be respectful! It happens to the best of us, and even to people who use they/them pronouns too.

Correct ways to do this:

- Mid-sentence as soon as you realize it ("And she said, sorry, *they* said that...")
- After the sentence ("She said that..." "Sorry, they said that...")
- Correcting yourself in the next sentence after you realize your mistake
- When a person points it out, simply apologize and move on

Incorrect ways to do this:

- Refusal to acknowledge the mistake
- Asserting that the person's pronoun is invalid
- Justify the mistake with an excuse, such as "Well, this is new to me, so it will take me some time..."
- Making a big scene out of an apology ("Oh my gosh, I am so sorry! That will *never* happen again!")

Please practice if you make a mistake! And some notes on being corrected:

- Someone may not want to correct you. Maybe they're tired, they don't care at the moment, they don't want to be out right now, but that doesn't mean that correct pronouns don't matter: they'd vastly prefer you not making a mistake.
- If someone is correcting you, it's because they have hope that you will learn! People don't spend time and energy on people they don't want to spend time around or who they don't think will appreciate being corrected.

Deadnames

A **deadname** is the name that someone was called before they transitioned or came out as trans or nonbinary. There is a reason why someone changed their name, and it is because they feel that name better captures their existence and how they want to be perceived. When someone is deadnamed, it effectively communicates that whoever deadnamed them will not respect their identity. Always refer to the name that someone gives you to avoid deadnaming.

Asking for pronouns

First, **never** force someone to share theirs because:

- You may out them in a space or situation they don't want to be out in
- They may not know what pronouns they want yet
- They might not feel comfortable telling you yet for any number of reasons

Asking can be as simple as "Hi, my name is ____, and I use he/him pronouns. Do you mind sharing yours so that I can make sure I talk and write about you in a respectful way?"

Be prepared to accept:

- Binary pronouns
- Non-binary pronouns
- Neopronouns
- Multiple pronouns
- Non-Western pronouns
- Hearing "I don't want to tell you" or "I don't know"
- That pronouns can change over time

For online meetings, change your display name to include your pronouns! Through making your pronouns known, you can indicate that it is safe for your client/child/colleagues to share theirs. And if you feel comfortable, put pronouns in your email signature to normalize the practice and to make it easy for people to share their pronouns and understand how to refer to you.

Clinicians, teachers, and non-caregiving adults can ask:

- What pronouns do you want our team to use for you?
- What do your parents call you? If this is different than what the child told you, ask how you should refer to them around their parents
- What is your name? Do you want me to call you by a different name?

Towards more inclusive language: Gender neutrality in practice

- While we may use these terms a lot, using the terms “male” and “female” to convey biological sex does not include intersex people.
- There are rarely occasions where it’s necessary to describe someone’s gender assigned at birth, so try to avoid it unless it’s one of those occasions.
- Rather than highlight a person’s assigned gender at birth (i.e., “She’s a trans woman/they’re nonbinary, but they were born as a boy.”), just say “non-binary person,” “trans woman,” etc.
 - It is clear what a person’s gender is through these terms, and describing their assigned gender at birth or focusing on a gender other than what they are may be harmful to that person
 - We also cannot make assumptions based on what we “think” because that is relying on a gender binary or how we understand what gender is rather than allowing that person to express their own
 - This also allows us to validate someone’s experiences without focusing on an “othered” existence
- Try to use non-gendered terms and language
 - If you don’t know someone’s gender identity or pronouns, simply say “person,” “individual,” “kid/teen,” “adult”
 - With groups, use “y’all,” “folks,” “kids,” “friends,” “students,” “peers,” or some other respectful, group-appropriate name
- If you hear a nonbinary person misgender themselves or use derogatory language around themselves, **this does not give you permission to do that**. They are the only ones who can describe and discuss their identity and experience...and anecdotally, a lot of nonbinary people experience gender a bit fluidly and may sometimes misgender themselves without thinking about it too hard.

Helpful Links for Terms, Explanations, and Other Things

- [Gender Spectrum](#): a resource for gender questions!
- [Understanding Gender by Gender Spectrum](#): a great explanation of gender and how it works
- [ADL – Let's Get It Right: Using Correct Pronouns and Names](#): easy- to-read guide to pronoun use
- [What Are the Different Genders? 64 Terms for Identity and Expression](#): a seriously cool and user-friendly guide to different identities
- [How to get better at using a coworker's nonbinary pronouns – tips from Ask a Manager](#): real world pronoun advice collected by a workplace expert

Thanks for reading! Liz (they/she) and Oscar (they/them)