



Pronouns: A Guide for the American University Community

Pronouns are everywhere. We use them every day in speech and in writing to take the place of people’s names. We use them without even thinking about it. Pronouns may not seem like that big of a deal, but they become a bigger deal when you try to live without them. And for some people, pronouns are a big deal because other folks don’t always use the correct pronouns to describe them. The practice of asking individuals what pronouns they use for themselves should be done in an effort to respect the diversity of gender identities beyond man and woman. The following guide is a starting point for using pronouns respectfully.

What is a pronoun?

- A pronoun is any word that can replace a noun or noun phrase (I, you, them).
• Pronouns refer specifically to people that are being talked about (he, she, him, her, they, them). They are pronouns that an individual identifies with and would like others use to when talking to or about that individual.

What kind of pronouns can be used?

*Don’t assume the gender of a pronoun: she/her/hers are NOT “female” pronouns, and he/him/his are NOT “male” pronouns.

Table with 4 columns: SUBJECT PRONOUN, OBJECT PRONOUN, POSSESSIVE PRONOUN, REFLEXIVE PRONOUN. It lists traditional pronouns (She, Her, Her/hers, Herself) and nonbinary pronouns (Ze*, Hir, Hir/Hirs, Himself, etc.).

Note: This chart is not the absolute guide to pronouns – always ask what someone’s pronouns are, and if it’s something you’ve never heard of, ask for clarification. Need some practice? Visit www.practicewithpronouns.com

How to pronounce gender neutral pronouns:

Table with 9 columns showing the pronunciation of gender neutral pronouns: Ze (zee), Hir (here), Hirs (heres), Himself (hereself), E (ee), Em (em), Eir (air), Eirs (airs), Eirself/Eirself (airself/emself).



*Additional alternate spellings for “ze” are “zie”, “sie”, “xie”, and “xe.”

**When using “they” as a singular gender inclusive pronoun, you would still conjugate associated verbs as you would for the plural version, as in “they are an activist” or “they like to go shopping”, not “they is an activist” or “they likes to go shopping.”

***Never argue with or question a person’s gender identity of pronouns.

How should I ask what someone’s pronouns are?

- **You can simply ask “What are your pronouns?” to the individual in private.**
 - You can also ask by saying: “What pronouns do you use?”; “How would you like me to refer to you?”; “How would you like to be addressed?”; “My name is Isaac and my pronouns are he and him. What about you?”
 - This may feel uncomfortable at first, but you do not want to say the wrong pronouns based on assumptions, and the student will most likely appreciate your effort.
 - Be sure to not just ask the gender ambiguous folks – ask everyone so as not to single anyone out.
 - You can also ask about pronouns as part of a group exercise, which would allow you to explain to the group what pronouns are. You could say something like: “Everyone tell your name, a fun fact about you, and your pronouns- pronouns you like to be referred to with. For example, my pronouns are she, her, and hers.”
- **If you make a mistake:** Mistakes happen! If you use the wrong pronoun, apologize and correct it, and then move on. Avoid continually talking about how bad you feel for making the mistake, because it makes the person feel like they need to console you. If you forget someone’s pronouns, follow the same protocol: **apologize, correct it, and move on.**
- If someone is using the wrong pronoun for a person, try to correct it by saying something like “Actually, Alex uses the pronoun *she*.” If folks continue to use the wrong pronoun, do not ignore it. It might help to ask the individual who has been misidentified if they would like you to take the person aside and remind them of the proper pronoun.

Should I use the term “preferred” or just ask for someone’s name or pronouns?

- Many people find the use of “preferred” to describe names and pronouns insulting. It is not someone’s “preferred” name, it is their name. Likewise, it is not someone’s “preferred” pronouns, but the pronouns that they use

Why is it important to respect pronouns?

- You can’t always tell someone’s pronouns by looking at a person.
- For those in positions of power, by respecting one’s pronouns consistently, you set an example for peers and other students.
- When someone is referred to by the wrong pronoun, it can make the person feel disrespected and alienated.
- Inquiring about pronouns is a simple way to show you want to cultivate an environment that respects all gender identities.

*****It can be tough to remember pronouns at first. The best solution is to practice! Correct pronoun use is an easy step toward showing respect for people of every gender.*****