



PRONOUN FACT SHEET

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Did you know the new APA style guidelines require the use of the singular "they"? Read this fact sheet to find out more and make sure you're using all pronouns correctly. As a note, the authors are queer and/or trans psychologists who work with trans and gender diverse clients. Also, the language and content in this fact sheet reflect current, culturally-specific information and will be updated over time.

what are pronouns?

Pronouns are the words used in place of a proper name. Examples include "she/her," "he/him," and gender-neutral pronouns, such as "they/them" and "ze/hir," [pronounced: zee/heer]. Some people use only one set of pronouns (e.g., she/her/hers only), others use multiple pronoun sets (e.g., she/they or any pronouns), and some use no pronouns at all (e.g., person uses a name instead of pronouns). For some people, their pronouns are the same every day, and for others they change (e.g., using she/her on some days and he/him on other days). The term "neopronouns" refers to pronouns that aren't "officially recognized" and are typically intended to be gender-neutral, such as "ze/hir/hirs," "ey/em/eir," and "ne/nim/nis." Pronouns are distinct from gender identity. For example, not all nonbinary people use gender-neutral pronouns, and men and women may use they/them pronouns or neopronouns.

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why is it important to use accurate pronouns?

We don't know a person's pronouns from their appearance. Although pronouns are distinct from gender identity, pronouns can be a way that people feel seen and affirmed in their gender identity or expression. When a person is referred to with an incorrect pronoun (or "misgendered"/ "mispronounced"), they can feel disrespected, invalidated, embarrassed, invisible, alienated, and/or dysphoric. Conversely, trans and nonbinary people report feeling euphoric, seen, valued, and validated when others use their pronouns. Not having to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you is a privilege. If you have this privilege, it's crucial to give others the same respect.

how do I know which pronouns to use?

The only way to know someone's pronouns is if they share them with you. If, when, and how you ask someone about their pronouns matters and can depend on the context. If the person is a stranger or brief acquaintance, you may not need to know their pronouns and can default to using "they/them" pronouns. If the person is someone you'll have continual contact with and will refer to them using pronouns, you can look for markers that share pronouns (e.g., nametags, email subject lines) or you can ask. Trans and nonbinary people have varying reactions to being asked about their pronouns; sharing pronouns can be difficult for some people who are exploring gender, are not out, or don't want to choose pronouns. For others, sharing their pronouns is important and is a crucial way they avoid being misgendered. How the question is asked matters.

how do I ask about pronouns?

Introductions are a great time to invite people to share their pronouns and to share your own.

“My name is Chase and my pronouns are he and him. What about you?”

or

“Do you mind if I ask what pronouns you use?”

It’s important to provide an opportunity for others to share their pronouns, but not to force anyone to share their pronouns. For example, in a group setting you could say:

“Let’s go around and each share our name, our pronouns if you feel comfortable sharing them, and our professional roles.”

If someone doesn’t share their pronouns, it’s best not to single them out by requesting they share. Any time you don’t know a person’s pronouns, you can either avoid using pronouns, default to using their name, or you can use they/them pronouns. However, if you do know a person’s pronouns, it’s important to use their accurate pronouns rather than defaulting to they/them for everyone. Using they/them pronouns when a person specifies another pronoun set (e.g., she/her, he/him, ze/hir etc.) can still be experienced as misgendering. There has been a move away from asking for “preferred gender pronouns” to just asking for “pronouns” because the term “preferred” downplays the importance of using accurate pronouns.

when and how should I correct others?

While some people won’t want to bring a lot of attention to their pronouns, others will appreciate you correcting people for them. Therefore, it can be helpful to ask if the person would like you to correct other people in or outside of their presence. If someone uses the wrong pronoun for a person who isn’t present and would like their pronouns corrected, try a brief statement like:

“I think Sam uses she/her pronouns. And yes, I’m going to her house later too!”

If you notice someone used an incorrect pronoun when the person is present, there are a couple of options:

- If you’re not sure the person would appreciate the extra attention given the context, you can immediately chime in using their correct pronouns, such as, **“I agree, they did make an excellent comment.”**
- If you think it’s likely the person would appreciate the correction, you can say, **“I think the wrong pronouns were used earlier so I want to acknowledge that Aiden’s pronouns are he/him.”**

In a classroom or group context, it can be helpful to normalize correcting each other about pronouns. It can be helpful to frame corrections as part of a growth versus “gotcha” mentality.

what if I make a mistake?

Everyone makes mistakes. However, it’s important to take accountability for your mistake rather than making excuses, over-apologizing, or inadvertently asking someone to make you feel less guilty or uncomfortable.

If you catch your mistake in the moment, most people appreciate a quick apology and correction at the time of the mistake, such as, **“Her books are—I’m sorry, their books are over there.”**

If you only realize the mistake later, a brief apology can help. Try:

“I’m sorry I used the wrong pronoun earlier. I’m committed to working on this.”

To prevent mistakes, you should practice using the correct pronouns privately.

how to use gender-neutral pronouns & language?

Practice! If you don't practice using they/them and other gender-neutral pronouns, it's highly likely you'll make a mistake that will negatively impact someone else. You can practice by journaling, saying them out loud, or with a friend. It can be useful to practice gender-neutral pronouns while visualizing the person who uses them, especially right before you see the person. When addressing groups of people or people whose pronouns you haven't been told, use gender-neutral language, such as, **"siblings," "students," "friends," "folks," "all," or "y'all," rather than "brothers and sisters," or "guys," "ladies," "ma'am," or "sir"** (see table below).

You can also use descriptive language, such as, **"Can you give this paper to the person across the room with the white t-shirt and short brown hair?"**

Using gender neutral language will help you decrease assumptions about gender and conceptualize gender in nonbinary ways. It's important to go beyond remembering pronouns, to actually seeing and understanding genders outside of the binary.

what is wrong with using the phrase "he or she" when gender is unknown?

APA advocates for the use of singular "they" instead of "he or she," "because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender" (APA, 2019). The use of "he or she," "she or he," "s/he," and so on, reinforces the gender binary by presuming that people only use "he" or "she" pronouns. Writers should use the singular "they": (a) "to refer to a person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context," and (b) "when a person uses the singular 'they' as their pronoun," (APA, 2019).

American Psychological Association [APA]. (2019, September). *Singular "they."* APA Style. <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/grammar/singular-they>

AVOID

USE INSTEAD

"she or he"	they
ladies, gentlemen	everyone, folks, friends
husband, wife	partner, spouse
"you guys"	y'all, all, everyone
man, woman	person, student, client
men, women	people, adults
mother, father	parent, caregiver
brother, sister	sibling
boy, girl	kid, youth
son, daughter	child, teenager
pregnant women	pregnant people

 now that you've read up on pronouns, please take a moment to play this interactive game to practice using gender pronouns:

<https://pronouns.minus18.org.au>