

Pronouns

A guide to correct use

Definition

The Collins English dictionary defines a pronoun as:

A word that you use to refer to someone or something when you do not need to use a noun, often because the person or thing has been mentioned earlier. Examples are 'they', 'she', 'something', and 'myself'.

Example: I just saw Kim perform, she was fantastic.

All of us use pronouns every day, mostly without thinking much, if at all, about them. However, for some people, particularly trans and gender diverse people and their allies, pronouns become very important.

Pronouns are important because they are assigned based on either assumed or known gender identity (commonly she, they or he, hers, theirs or his, etc). This means that if someone gets a pronoun wrong (says 'he' instead of 'she' or 'they' for example) then it can cause distress and harm to the person being talked about – this is called misgendering. Misgendering can be done in other ways, such as referring to someone as a man/gentleman or woman/lady incorrectly, using titles such as Mr. or Mrs. incorrectly, or otherwise assigning the wrong gender or gendered language to a person.

Misgendering is considered by many as an act of psychological violence, and can cause serious psychological harm to people, adding to or triggering people's gender dysphoria*. Misgendering people can also cause general discomfort and make people feel disrespected, alienated and unwelcome, making them less likely to return or remain in your service/space.

With this in mind, we need to do all we can to ensure that we get it right when it comes to other people's pronouns. There are many simple ways that you can put safeguards in to your everyday language, forms, policies and processes to support you in this task.

Beyond he and she: gender neutral pronouns

Increasingly, as more awareness is raised about the true nature and diversity of gender identity and expression, people are branching out beyond the binary of male and female. Gender identities such as agender, genderqueer and non-binary are now more common among gender diverse young people than transgender or simply boy/man or girl/woman.^{1,2}

The most commonly used gender neutral pronoun is currently 'they/them/theirs'. Some people think or have been taught that the singular 'they' is grammatically incorrect; however, it is not. People use the singular they when they talk about a person whose gender they do not know (as was just done in this sentence!). Even if it were so, and it was grammatically incorrect, you need to ask yourself what is more important – being grammatically correct or ensuring people feel safe, valued and respected?

** Gender dysphoria is the distress or discomfort that may occur when a person's sex assigned at birth does not align with their gender.*

“ You can't know someone's pronouns from looking at them or simply by their name. ”

How to know which pronoun to use

You can't know someone's pronouns from looking at them or simply by their name. The best and only way to find out someone's pronoun is to ask them – preferably privately and always in a respectful way. Try 'What is your pronoun?' or 'Which pronouns do you use?'. Here are some other ways you can normalise asking about gender pronouns:

- When introducing yourself, say your own pronouns (e.g. Hi my name is Mac, my pronouns are she/her or they/them).
- On your business card/email signature (e.g. underneath your name and title, add your pronouns).
- If it's a group situation and there is an introductory round, ask everyone to say their name as well as their pronoun (start everyone off by telling them your own name and pronouns).
- If you're running a program/service, add 'Pronouns' as a field to be completed in your registration forms, and have a process to make sure the relevant people are informed BEFORE interacting with that person.

This can feel awkward or unfamiliar at first; however, over time it will become a usual part of your language and practice ... plus it's a lot less awkward than making assumptions and misgendering people.

Oops ... I said the wrong pronoun

If you make a mistake, it's OK, you're human! Everyone slips up from time to time.

DO: apologise, correct your mistake and move on!

DON'T: go on and on about how bad you feel, that you're not that person and you would never do that, or explain to the person how hard it is for you to get it right – this makes things much worse! It makes the person you misgendered feel uncomfortable, and like they are responsible for comforting you, which is not OK.

Learning to use pronouns differently, or learning to use a different pronoun for someone you know, can take time and practise. That is perfectly normal. A good idea is to practise in private, either in the mirror/on your own or with a friend you trust. With time, it will become a normal part of your vocabulary.

Being a good ally / Stepping up for others

There may be a time where you overhear or have a conversation with someone and notice they keep saying the wrong pronoun when referring to someone. It is SO important that you speak up for the person who is being talked about. If appropriate, correct/remind the person then and there by saying something like 'Arlo uses they/them pronouns' and then move on. If you don't feel comfortable correcting the person in front of others, take them aside after and have a conversation with them about how important pronouns are and what getting them right means to people.

If possible/appropriate, follow up privately with the person who was misgendered to check they are OK and ask how they would like to be supported.

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¹ Smith E, Jones T, Ward R, Dixon J, Mitchell A & Hillier L (2014). *From Blues to Rainbows: Mental health and wellbeing of gender diverse and transgender young people in Australia*. Melbourne: The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society.

² Strauss P, Cook A, Winter S, Watson V, Wright Toussaint D & Lin A. (2017). *Trans Pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people. Summary of results*. Telethon Kids Institute, Perth, Australia.