



Gender Pronouns: An Introduction

What are “gender pronouns?”

The third-person words we use in the English language that indicate a person or something a person possesses, like he/him/his, they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, etc.

Why do they matter?

Most of us probably don't spend too much time thinking about what pronouns people use when talking to and about us. However, there are many people who use pronouns other than those that they were assigned at birth, such as trans and gender-nonconforming/nonbinary individuals. For these people, the concept of pronouns can be a real and exhausting stressor. Using the wrong gender pronouns when referring to someone is one way of **misgendering**, and this can cause feelings of anxiety, distress, worthlessness or an exacerbation of **dysphoria** (strong and persistent discomfort as a result of feeling like one's gender identity does not match one's assigned sex).

Using the right gender pronouns is a great and easy way to show love and respect for each other and our identities!

When should we ask for them?

In many spaces, it's becoming the norm to ask for pronouns every time you meet a new person!

The only assumption you should make about someone's pronouns is that you can never know for sure until you ask. You can never tell what gender a person identifies as by looking at them from the outside! So it's always best to err on the side of caution and not misgender someone by accident. Just ask!

How should we ask for them?

A simple question! “What are your gender pronouns?” or even “What are your pronouns?”

How should I respond if someone asks me for my pronouns?

Be as clear as possible! When someone asks you for your gender pronouns, it's best to answer in a format like “she/her/hers” or “they/them/theirs.” If you say things like “female pronouns” or “just whatever!” then the person you're speaking with does not get a clear answer as to how to refer to you.

Using the right pronouns is hard, though.

Yes, it can be. Especially when a person uses pronouns that you may never have heard of before, like ze/zir/zirs or ey/em/eirs. But like with everything, practice makes perfect! Websites like

www.practicewithpronouns.com can help you along. While it may take some effort, this is a very easy and necessary way to affirm each other and our differing identities.

What if I mess up someone's pronouns?

Apologize, correct yourself, and make an effort to do better next time. Making a big deal over it can feel even worse to the person who has been misgendered.

Some Common Pronouns

	Subject	Object	Possessives	Reflexive	Example Sentence
she	she	her	her/hers	herself	She went to the movies with her friend who loves to hang out with her. The movie pick was hers. She enjoyed herself.
he	he	him	his	himself	He went to the movies with his friend who loves to hang out with him. The movie pick was his. He enjoyed himself.
they	they	them	their/theirs	themselves	They went to the movies with their friend who loves to hang out with them. The movie pick was theirs. They enjoyed themselves.
ze with zir (pronounced "zee" and "zeer")	ze	zir	zir/zirs	zirsself	Ze went to the movies with zir friend who loves to hang out with zir. The movie pick was zirs. Ze enjoyed zirsself.
ze with hir (pronounced "zee" and "heer")	ze	hir	hir/hirs	hirsself	Ze went to the movies with hir friend who loves to hang out with hir. The movie pick was hirs. Ze enjoyed hirsself.
xe (pronounced "xe")	xe	xem	xyr/xyrs	xyrsself	Xe went to the movies with xyr friend who loves to hang out with xem. The movie pick was xyrs. Xe enjoyed xyrsself.
ey (pronounced "ay")	ey	em	eir/eirs	emself	Ey went to the movies with eir friend who loves to hang out with em. The movie pick was eirs. Ey enjoyed emself.
Person prefers not to use pronouns. (example name: Mary)	Mary	Mary's	Mary's	Mary's self	Mary went to the movies with Mary's friend who loves to hang out with Mary. The movie pick was Mary's. Mary enjoyed Mary's self.

These are only a few of the most common gender-neutral pronouns out there. Since this is a new and grassroots field, there are countless other pronoun sets that people have created and popularized for themselves. To find out more, check out <http://nonbinary.org/wiki/Pronouns> which has a very comprehensive list, including some in non-English languages!

Pronoun Exercise: Fill In the Blanks!

(tip: try saying these aloud! it will help you get used to speaking them as well as writing them)

1. Fill in with ze/zir pronouns!

I went with _____ to pick blueberries, because _____ said they were in season, but not for much longer. _____ drove both of us in _____ car, and I used Google Maps to get us there, because _____ can be a little directionally challenged. When we got there, I paid for _____ and myself and we picked blueberries for almost two hours. We kept eating them as we were picking them, though—_____ had juice all over _____ by the time we left.

2. Fill in with they/them pronouns!

When _____ called me about where I was going to spend fall break, I said that I didn't know yet. _____ asked if I wanted to go on a road trip with _____ and a few of our mutual friends. I said it sounded great, and asked _____ what I should pack, since I didn't have a suitcase with me. _____ offered me one of _____ to borrow, and I accepted.

3. Fill in with xe/xyr pronouns!

_____ called me after a long day at work and said that _____ had made a spectacle of _____ in a staff meeting. I reassured _____, and then offered to come over and bring _____ some of _____ favorite chocolate treats to unwind. We watched a stupid romantic comedy that was a favorite of _____ and by the end of it, _____ was feeling much better about the day.

4. Fill in with ey/em pronouns!

_____ is the star in a new musical opening next week at the community theater, and I'm very excited to go and see _____ perform! _____ has been acting since age five, and _____ talents have grown considerably over the years. When _____ first started performing, _____ got the role of "Tree #3," but now in this new production _____ has a number all to _____, with a beautiful costume that fits _____ perfectly.

Answer key:

1. I went with zir to pick blueberries, because ze said they were in season, but not for much longer. Ze drove both of us in zir car, and I used Google Maps to get us there, because ze can be a little directionally challenged. When we got there, I paid for zir and myself and we picked blueberries for almost two hours. We kept eating them as we were picking them, though—ze had juice all over zirself by the time we left.

2. When they called me about where I was going to spend fall break, I said that I didn't know yet. They asked if I wanted to go on a road trip with themself and a few of our mutual friends. I said it sounded great, and asked them what I should pack, since I didn't have a suitcase with me. They offered me one of theirs to borrow, and I accepted.

3. Xe called me after a long day at work and said that xe had made a spectacle of xyrself in a staff meeting. I reassured xem, and then offered to come over and bring xem some of xyr favorite chocolate treats to unwind. We watched a stupid romantic comedy that was a favorite of xyrs and by the end of it, xe was feeling much better about the day.

4. Ey is the star in a new musical opening next week at the community theater, and I'm very excited to go and see em perform! Ey has been acting since age five, and eir talents have grown considerably over the years. When ey first started performing, ey got the role of "Tree #3," but now in this new production ey has a number all to emself, with a beautiful costume that fits em perfectly.