

pronouns.
what you need to know



Human Resources

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

What you need to know about pronouns

Introduction

Our societal knowledge of gender expansive communities (eg. transgender, nonbinary) has increased in the recent past. One aspect that people may struggle with is the ability to communicate appropriately and accurately when using newer, or variations of gendered pronouns. If pronouns are used incorrectly, whether intentional or not, it may cause harm and feelings of disrespect and exclusion.

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are used in many languages to replace a noun or noun phrase. “Personal pronouns” are some of the most commonly used, such as “I, you, they, she.” Pronouns have three cases:

- Nominative (I, you, he, she, it, they)
- Objective (me, him, her, us, them)
- Possessive (my, your, his, her, their)

People may share three pronouns, such as she/her/hers, to show and normalize their different uses and applications. Some pronouns are newer, such as ve/ver/vis, in which case it is helpful to know the three different forms. Some people prefer a variety of pronouns such as she/her/they/them, so sharing several examples helps others learn how to accurately refer to that person.

Why are pronouns important?

In conversations, people will refer to other people by using pronouns instead of their name. The pronouns “he” and “she” have an implied gender, for men or women, respectively. Oftentimes people make assumptions about gender identities, based on appearances or names. How often have you seen a person’s name and wondered about the person’s gender? A mind shift that could be helpful in becoming more inclusive is to wonder about the range of identities rather than a binary, man or woman identity. It is important to steer away from making assumptions about a person’s gender identity, because assuming someone’s gender is a potentially harmful practice that sends the message that a gender is supposed to be represented in a certain way.

For example, say you assume that a person is a man and refer to that person by using he/him pronouns. What if that person identifies as a transgender woman? The harm in that situation is that you have indicated to that person that they in fact do not look or sound enough like a woman (Airton, 2019). Additionally you have reinforced the notion that gender identities are limited to two genders. Another important and inclusive mindshift is to expand the ways that you might see people represent themselves. Instead of a binary expectation, allowing the idea of a spectrum of representations (including expansive gender expressions) is an inclusive practice. Everyone of us is unique, and should be allowed to express our gender, as we see fit.

Furthermore, many people confuse “gender” with “sex.” For example, the increasingly popular “gender reveal” rituals where people gather to find out if a mother will be having a “boy” or “girl” is more accurately a “sex reveal” rather than a “gender reveal” (Airton, 2019). Consider this: as a young person, one might identify as a “college student” which then evolves through *processes* to include identifying as a “wife” or “mother” or “grandmother” throughout one’s lifetime. In other words, a new perspective to consider is that gender identity is a *process* which involves a vast array of experiences, reflection and personal conception (Ghosh & Pataki, 2012; Airton, 2019).

To share or not to share?

Sharing pronouns is an inclusive practice, however some people may not feel comfortable sharing

their pronouns in certain groups or situations. They may feel uncomfortable due to power dynamics, or they may be in a state of transition with their gender identity. Our campus has a directive called the [IDEA Plan](#) that calls for each of us to do our part in making our campus more inclusive and welcoming to all. Normalizing the practice of sharing pronouns is one way that we can achieve that. Requiring that people share pronouns is not an inclusive practice. Instead, we can offer the opportunity to do so, to indicate our commitment to the inclusion and respect for all. Staff Council has published a guide called, "[Be An Ally - 5 Easy Ways to Normalize Pronoun Usage](#)" that has some helpful tips on pronoun usage, including using the pronoun "they" when in doubt. Other options include using a person's name instead of a pronoun, or simply asking a person which pronouns they use: "What are your pronouns? I want to be sure I get them right." Furthermore, the phrase "preferred pronouns" or "preferred gender pronouns" has become very popular, and while the intentions might be very good, it implies that any of the pronouns besides the ones that are specified are acceptable. In other words, pronouns for most people are not a matter of preference, but rather a vital part of their identity. An inclusive practice when referring to pronouns is to drop the word "preferred."

Ways to share and make your support of pronouns heard

There are different ways in which you can share your pronouns and show your support of this inclusive practice. You can start by sharing your pronouns when you introduce yourself in a meeting, "My name is Clara, I use she, her, hers pronouns." You can include them in your email signature, personal bio or website. You can change the profile setting in your personal [CU Boulder Zoom account](#) so that they appear next to your name automatically whenever you log into a Zoom meeting. Or, you can change them while in a Zoom meeting by clicking on the three dots in the corner of your video square (the caveat is that the person hosting the meeting has to have those options turned on). You can also share your pronouns on physical name tags. Faculty and instructors can include a pronoun statement in their syllabi, and students can add pronouns in their student portal. By consistently sharing your own pronouns if you are comfortable in doing so, you are indicating your support for this inclusive practice, and paving the way for others to follow your example.

Examples

The chart below shows different sets of pronouns, including xe/xem and ve/ver that are considered "neo-pronouns" (Airton, 2019). It is important to keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list. Some folks prefer to not use pronouns at all, are in the process of deciding on pronouns, or they might ask to have their pronouns varied or "flexed." Flexing pronouns means asking people to use different pronouns during the course of a conversation. For example: "**He** will go to the store this afternoon, where **she** will pick up some groceries for **their** house." Others use multiple sets of pronouns, such as "she, her, they, them." The important principle to keep in mind is that pronouns are a vital part of people's identities, and the way they use them is highly personal. For example, using they/them/theirs pronouns are used by some (but not all) to steer clear of a gender binary, or to have a "breather" from categories (Airton, 2019). An interesting and useful analogy is the use of "Ms." by some women to keep their marital state private. For some, using they/them/theirs pronouns offers the same kind of privacy, or it might just be the set of pronouns that resonate with them the best. The use of "they" as singular for a pronoun is not only common, it is recognized by the MLA Style Handbook, the Chicago Manual of Style and the Merriam Webster Dictionary as of September 2019.

Table 1. Examples of Pronouns

Pronouns →	(f)ae (f)aer (f)aer (f)aers (f)aerself	E/ey Em Eir Eirs eirself	He Him His his himsel f	Per Per Pers pers persel f	She Her her Hers hersel f	They Them Their Theirs thems elf	Ve Ver Vis Vis versel f	Xe Xem Xyr Xyrs xemsel f	Ze/zie Hir/zir hir/zir Hirs hirsself
Subject →	Ae/fae is leaving today.	E/ey is leaving today.	He is leavin g today.	Per is leavin g today.	She is leavin g today.	They are leavin g today.	Ve is leavin g today.	Xe is leaving today.	Ze/zie is leavin g today.
Object →	The people elected aer/faer for president.	The people electe d em for presid ent.	The people electe d him for presid ent.	The people electe d per for presid ent.	The people electe d her for presid ent.	The people electe d them for presid ent. .	The people electe d ver for presid ent.	The people elected xem for president.	The people electe d hir/zir for presid ent.
Possessiv e →	Aer/faer favorite food is chocolate. Fae’s favorite food is chocolate.	Eir favorit e food is chocol ate.	His favorit e food is chocol ate.	Pers favorit e food is chocol ate.	Her favorit e food is chocol ate.	Their favorit e food is chocol ate.	Vis favorit e food is chocol ate.	Xyr favorite food is chocola te.	Hir/zir favorit e food is chocol ate.
Possessiv e pronoun →	The jacket is aers/faers.	The jacket is eirs.	The jacket is his.	The jacket is pers.	The jacket is hers.	The jacket is theirs.	The jacket is vis.	The jacket is xyrs.	The jacket is hirs
Reflexive →	Ae/fae would like to do it aerself/fae rself.	E/ey would like to do it eirself.	He would like to do it himself	Per would like to do it perself	She would like to do it herself	They would like to do it thems elf.*	Ve would like to do it verself	Xe would like to do it xemself	Ze/zie would like to do it hirsself.
Pronunci ation guide	Ae - “ay” Fae - “fay” Faer - “fair”	Eir - “air”		Per - “purr”			Ve - “vee”	The “x” is pronoun ced like the “z” in English.	Ze: “zee” Hir: “here”

*This is technically correct, although it might take some time to get used to. **This chart is adapted from <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>

Tips for gender neutral language

With practice and guidance, using gender neutral language can help to create more inclusive dialogues and conversations. Regional colloquialisms sometimes can slip into our everyday words, such as “you guys” or “ladies and gentlemen.” Being thoughtful about the words we use will go a long way with the impact that they can potentially have. The following is a list of tips and words to use that will help our language be more gender neutral:

1. Start noticing your own language: are you using gendered language that excludes people?
2. Don't assume: ask before assuming about people's relationships, use spouse/partner instead of husband/wife
3. Unlearn habits: the gender binary is one habit that can be unlearned.
4. Practice using alternatives: here are a few below

Use this...	Instead of this...
person, individual	instead of man
human beings, humanity	mankind
First Year Student	Freshman
artificial, machine-made, synthetic	man-made
the average person	the common man
Chair, Chairperson, coordinator, head	Chairman
mail carrier, letter carrier, the postal worker	mailman
Police Officer or Peace Officer	Policeman
flight attendant	steward or stewardess
Legislator, Congressional Representative	congressman
grown-ups, adults, families, guardians	mommies and daddies
sibling, child, parent, spouse, partner	sister, son, mom, dad, husband, wife
folks, you all, y'all	“you guys”

*Adapted from <https://atlascorps.org/gender-inclusive-language-tips-respect-diversity/>

Honorifics and using an “X” in words

Another way that people refer to others is through honorifics, such as Mr., Ms., or Mrs. A gender-neutral alternative is “Mx.,” which is pronounced “mix” and was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2017. The title “Dr.” is gender neutral as well. Similar to “Mx.,” the term “Latinx” is being used to replace Latino/a and Latin@, particularly in higher education settings and social media starting around 2014 (Salinas Jr. & Lozano, 2019).

Name pronunciation guidelines

In addition to learning how to use gender neutral and inclusive language, pronouncing someone's name correctly is an important way to help people feel a sense of belonging and is also a sign of

respect. If a name is mispronounced, it has potential to cause harm to that person, and add to the everyday slights that person might have to endure (Sue, 2010). When you meet someone whose name is difficult for you to pronounce, you can check with that person to see if you are getting it right. One way to do this is to simply ask them: “Can you pronounce your name for me so that I get it right? It is important to me to say it the way you would like it to be pronounced.” There are online tools to learn how to pronounce names from different languages, such as <https://www.pronouncenames.com/>; however, the best practice is to always check with the person to ensure you are using the correct pronunciation.

Students and instructors at CU Boulder can utilize a [tool in Canvas called Name Coach](#) that allows you to record your name so that others can learn how to pronounce your name correctly. If you are not a student or an instructor you can go to <https://cloud.name-coach.com/> to sign up for an account. Both instances have instructions on how to add a button to your email signature.

You might think that your name isn't hard to pronounce, however, it is important to check our own assumptions, positions and privileges. Furthermore, by using the Name Coach tool, you encourage others to do the same while promoting the inclusive practice of correct name pronunciation. The key concept to keep in mind is that both pronouns and name pronunciations are part of people's identities. Paying attention to both is an inclusive practice, and helps people feel valued, included and respected.

Tools and tips to help you practice pronoun usage

Learning new pronouns and using gender-neutral pronouns might not come easy for everyone. Hopefully the following tips and tools can help.

An Australian non-profit called the [Minus18 Foundation](#) is a youth-led organization focused on inclusion for Australian youth, and advocates for a community that is free of homophobia and transphobia. This organization developed a [pronoun practice application](#) that gamifies the pronoun learning journey. The application teaches you pronunciation and usage of many pronouns, and challenges you to try out your new skills by filling in the blanks in sample sentences.

Pronoun practice app- <https://pronouns.minus18.org.au/>

One way you can practice paying attention to pronouns, is to have a piece of paper or word document on your computer, and when people introduce themselves, write down their pronouns (if they share them) along with their name. This small act will help you remember people's pronouns and will help you remember to check the list to ensure you are using them correctly. An effective way to learn how to use pronouns correctly is to ask colleagues to hold you accountable. Give them permission to correct you if you make a mistake during a conversation. For example, your colleagues could say, “I think you meant to say ‘they’ are interested in joining our meeting.” Or, “Alisha uses they/them pronouns.”

Set aside some time to intentionally practice using “they” pronouns whenever possible or use people's names. For example, instead of saying, “Everyone can study pronouns in his or her own time,” you can practice saying, “Everyone can study pronouns in their own time” or “Julie, Ana and Jorge can study pronouns in their own time.” Reading passages in books and articles that use they/them pronouns helps to make it more familiar.

As you become more familiar with this shift, you may find yourself making mistakes. Practice holding yourself accountable by correcting yourself in front of others. For example you might accidentally say, “Hi guys, how are you?” You can correct yourself and say, pardon me, I meant to say, “Hi everyone!” or “Hi y’all!” If you realize after a while that you accidentally used the wrong pronoun for someone, you can reach out to that person and let them know you made a mistake and would like to apologize for it. For example, “I am sorry I used the wrong pronouns earlier for you. I know you use they/them pronouns, and I will make sure I get it right next time.”

Want to learn more?

The University of Colorado Denver’s Office of Equity has [published a guide on Gender, Trans Visibility, Pronouns and Language and other resources](#).

The CU Boulder Pride Office also [has a variety of resources](#), including links to guide students, staff and faculty to change your preferred name in the system, as well as [another pronoun usage guide](#).

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