

A Short Guide to Sharing Pronouns for Trans Allies

What do we mean when we say “pronouns”?

The term “pronouns” describes the words we use to refer to people when we are not using their name. For example, you might say “Sarah has written this guide on sharing pronouns, ***she*** hopes people find it useful.”

The most common pronouns are she/her, he/him, and they/them, although there are many more less common ones which people might use¹. While the pronouns we use often have some relation to our gender identities, pronouns themselves are not indicators of gender. For example, someone who uses the pronouns he/him may be a man, but may also be non-binary²; and not all people who use the pronouns they/them are trans³.

Why is sharing pronouns important?

Many people assume that the pronouns they should use for an individual are obvious: people who look like men should be referred to using he/him, and people who look like women should be referred to as she/her.

However, these assumption based on appearance can be frustrating and harmful, particularly for trans folks who might challenge people’s perceptions of what a man or woman looks like, and those who might use gender-neutral pronouns. If we choose to make assumptions about which pronouns are correct, we risk misgendering people and/or singling out trans people who want to clarify their pronouns.

By normalising the practice of sharing our pronouns, we can all challenge the narrative that pronouns can be assumed, and create a safe and supportive community for trans people. Using the correct pronouns can - particularly for trans folks - be an act of validation and a reminder that you recognise the importance of their gender identity.

¹ The Minus18 Pronouns App allows you to view some additional pronoun options, and practice their usage: <https://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns-app/>.

² Non-binary people’s gender identities sit outside of the binary genders of men and women. They might identify as neither gender, a mix of both genders, or a third separate gender.

³ We use the term trans in this document to refer to individuals whose gender does not match the gender they were assigned at birth. Trans folks may have a binary gender identity i.e. trans men and trans women, or a non-binary identity e.g. genderqueer, bigender or agender.

Sharing pronouns best practice

Normalising the sharing of pronouns means incorporating it into our everyday lives so it stops being unusual and starts becoming something which we do naturally, without thinking.

One way to share your pronouns is to add them to your email signature, by simply including a short line under your name and role which reads, “*My pronouns are...*” This is particularly useful if you often correspond with people you might not see on a day-to-day basis. If you are concerned that people will not understand what this means, you could also include a link to this document e.g. “*My pronouns are... To find out more about pronouns and why I’m sharing mine, [click here.](#)”* Once you have updated your signature, you could also email colleagues encouraging them to do the same.

Another way to normalise the sharing of pronouns is by including them whenever people are doing introductions, for example at the start of a meeting or workshop. You could say, “*Let’s start by going round and introducing ourselves - if you could each give your name, your pronouns and which team you’re from. I’ll start - my name is Sarah, my pronouns are she/her, and I’m here from the Students’ Association.*” If people seem unsure, you can provide a short explanation of what pronouns are, like the one at the beginning of this document.

You can also be inclusive of trans folks by avoiding using gendered terms to refer to groups of people, for example, rather than saying, “*Welcome ladies and gentlemen!*” you could say, “*Welcome everybody!*”

FAQ

1. Is using “they/them” grammatically correct?

Some people find using pronouns other than she/her and he/him a little awkward and that’s OK - sometimes it can take a while to get used to new things - however it is still important to respect people’s pronouns, and not discount them because they make us feel uncomfortable.

It is worth noting that most of us already use “they/them” to refer to individuals whose gender or pronouns we are unsure of - for example, if a colleague said, “*I spoke to the auditor about our GDPR compliance.*” we might respond, “*Really? What did **they** say?*” The use of plural pronouns to refer to a singular subject has been around in English since the 16th Century, and in 2015 the American Dialect Society selected the singular “they” as their word of the year⁴.

If you’re unsure how to use pronouns in context, [this web-based app](#) can help with examples and opportunities to practice.

⁴ *This Pronoun is the Word of the Year for 2015:* <http://time.com/4173992/word-of-the-year-2015-they/>

2. What if I don't care what pronouns people use for me?

It's OK not to mind which pronouns people use to refer to you, but particularly if you are cisgender⁵ it is important to consider how you frame this and the impact that might have on trans folks around you.

Often cisgender people "don't care" because they know that people will likely default to their correct pronouns and even if they don't, their gender won't really be up for debate. The same cannot be said for trans folks, and saying you "don't care" about pronouns can suggest that trans folks are silly for requesting that their pronouns be respected.

If you genuinely don't mind, considering saying *"I'm happy with all pronouns"* or *"Most people use [pronouns] and I'm happy with that."*

3. Are pronouns the same as "preferred pronouns"?

You may have heard people ask for others' "preferred pronouns". While the intent behind this is often good, the use of the word "preferred" can be problematic and so we'd recommend not using it.

Firstly, it can imply that pronouns are simply a preference - something that's nice to get right but not a necessity, which isn't the case. It can also suggest a divide between pronouns (interpreted as linked to the gender someone was assigned at birth) and "preferred pronouns" (linked to an individual's current gender identity), which can isolate and alienate trans folks.

Secondly, the language of preference can create confusion for cisgender folks who have never considered their gender before, and for whom their pronouns *just are* as opposed to being something they've chosen. This is not necessarily a bad thing and can start a useful conversation about things that cisgender people take for granted but could quickly derail a quick round of introductions!

4. Can I just say, "I prefer male/female pronouns"?

Some people may find sharing their pronouns confusing and instead say something like, *"I prefer male pronouns."* or *"I'm a woman, so..."* While this is understandable, it's important to challenge the idea that pronouns are an indicator of gender, or vice versa.

⁵ The word "cisgender" simply refers to someone whose gender identity to the gender they were assigned at birth; it is sometimes shortened to "cis".

If someone does say this in a round of introductions, you can gently remind them that pronouns are not inherently linked to gender so it would be great if they could share their pronouns too and perhaps remind them of the most common choices.

5. What if we already know each other?

Many of us will interact with multiple people every day whose pronouns we have never asked and have just assumed. In some cases, we may have guessed correctly, but in others it's possible we are using the wrong pronouns without the individual realising, or that the person concerned is aware but doesn't feel comfortable correcting us.

Even where you are fairly confident you know people's pronouns, it's still good to refresh our knowledge and give folks the opportunity to provide their correct pronouns. It's also important to note that gender is fluid, and people may wish to change their pronouns throughout their life for a variety of reasons. Giving them the opportunity to do that without having to single themselves out is part of being a good ally to trans people.

6. Isn't sharing pronouns a waste of time?

For people who have never been misgendered and whose correct pronouns are used routinely by everyone around them, sharing pronouns can seem silly or boring. Doing it consistently or repeatedly can seem redundant and like a waste of time.

However, it's important to remember that for people who have experienced misgendering or whose pronouns are less common, the simple act of sharing - which takes just an extra minute in a round of introductions - is a welcome and important act of inclusion.

7. What if I don't know someone's pronouns?

The purpose of normalising the regular sharing of pronouns is to ensure we're less likely to be in situations where we don't know someone's pronouns. However, sometimes it's unavoidable - for example when you meet someone new for the first time. In this scenario, you can respectfully share your pronouns and ask for theirs: *"Sorry, I don't think we've met before. My name's Sarah and my pronouns are she/her - how about you?"* or simply ask, *"Could you just remind me of your pronouns?"*

You can also listen to how people who know the individual well refer to them, but be aware that they may have simply assumed the person's pronouns, and the individual may not have felt comfortable challenging them, so there's no guarantee they're correct.

8. What if I or someone else gets someone's pronouns wrong?

We all make mistakes, but for trans folks who are misgendered multiple times a day, what seems like a small error can have a significant negative impact.

If you've made the mistake, you can quickly apologise, correct yourself and move on. While it might be tempting to avoid drawing attention to it, leaving your mistake uncorrected can result in others also using the wrong pronouns and if the person you misgendered is present, they may feel hurt that you do not seem to care enough to get their pronouns right.

If someone else uses the incorrect pronouns, you can gently correct them at the time: *"Actually, I think Sarah uses she/her."* or have a quick conversation one-on-one to let them know their mistake. If the person who has been misgendered is present, you should allow them to choose how they wish to respond - they may not want to draw attention to themselves in that moment - but you should reaffirm their correct pronouns where possible and check in with them one-on-one to see if there's any other actions they would like you to take.

Either way, if the person who has been misgendered was not present, there is no need to tell them what happened - doing so can often be distressing and frustrating, but you may want to double check their pronouns if you're now unsure what is correct.

This guide is largely based on the excellent article ['Pronoun Round Etiquette: How to Create Spaces that are More Inclusive'](#) from the website [This Body is Not an Apology](#).

Other useful resources include:

- ['Asking for and Using Pronouns: Making Spaces More Gender Inclusive'](#)
- ['Here's Why Gender Pronouns Are So Important'](#)
- [The University of Wisconsin's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center FAQs](#)
- ['Why it makes sense for cis people to state their pronouns'](#)
- ['Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Gender-Neutral Pronouns'](#)