

LGBTQ+  
BASICS  
PRONOUNS

he herself  
her them  
ze theirs  
she hers hir  
they hirself  
themselves

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# THE BASICS SERIES

## AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSONAL PRONOUNS

**PRONOUN:** *A word used instead of a noun group for referring to a person, group, or thing that has already been mentioned or that is obvious from the context. The words ‘you’, ‘it’, ‘mine’, ‘this’, and ‘myself’ are all pronouns. Words like ‘anyone’, ‘everything’ and ‘whoever’ are also pronouns.* - [Macmillan Dictionary](#)

Pronouns are words we use many times in our day-to-day lives to refer to ourselves and others. When we refer to someone but don't use their name, we use a pronoun (e.g. he, she, his, hers, they) and that pronoun is usually based on the perception we have of that person's gender. We are used to referring to individuals as 'she' or 'he' and groups of people as 'they' but there are other options. For example, in conversation we often use 'they' as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun when talking about a generic person or when we do not know someone's gender, eg. 'A colleague emailed to say they would be late to the meeting' or 'Every person should feel confident that they can share their opinion'.

Using 'they' as a singular pronoun when you don't know someone's gender is a good gender-neutral option, rather than using 'he or she'. In the English language, the pronouns 'she' and 'he' assume there are only two genders and do not work for people who don't identify with either of these genders. Using 'they' when talking about a generic person or when we do not know someone's gender helps to reduce gender bias and promote LGBTQ+ equality, ultimately contributing to a world where everyone is accepted without exception. You can read more about this in the [Inclusive Language Guides](#).

Pronouns are an important topic for [nonbinary and transgender people](#), who face misgendering on a daily basis. For some trans people, using pronouns that accurately reflect their gender identity means using gendered pronouns like 'she' or 'he', whereas for some people this could be using a gender-neutral pronoun, like 'they'. People who are non-binary or gender non-conforming don't necessarily identify as men or women and often avoid referring to themselves using gendered pronouns (he or she) as they do not reflect who they are. 'They/them/theirs' are the most common gender-neutral pronouns but they are not the only ones. Some non-binary people use other sets of pronouns, like 'ze' (pronounced 'zee'), while some choose to only go by their names.

This guide is an extension to the [LGBTQ+ Basics guide](#) and we'll look at why pronouns are important, some different pronouns

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that people may use and share some advice on how to ask for someone's pronouns and share your own in a respectful way.

Recently, we are seeing more awareness about how the use of pronouns affects others and people are beginning to add their pronouns [to their email signatures](#) and social media profiles, with many conferences and events including a space for pronouns on name tags. These are great ways to actively demonstrate allyship and help people to feel included and while it might take some getting used to, it takes only a small effort and using the right pronouns for someone will in turn make them feel acknowledged and valid.

# WHAT PRONOUNS DO PEOPLE USE?

When sharing pronouns in conversation, most people identify the pronouns they use from the first two columns in the table, e.g. “I use she/her pronouns” or ‘My pronouns are they/them’. This keeps the sentence short and implies that they also use the pronouns in the other columns of that row.

In writing, people often share the pronouns they use from the first two or three columns in the table, e.g. ‘I use he/him pronouns’ or ‘My pronouns are she/her/hers’.

In addition, some people may feel comfortable being referred to by more than one set of pronouns and may switch between them. For example, they may display she/they in their email signature, which would mean they are happy to be referred to as she/her/hers or they/them/theirs. If you are ever unsure, just ask in a respectful way.

*Please note that these are just a few examples, and not a complete list of pronouns people may use.*



## Examples of personal pronouns (singular third-person)

SUBJECT	OBJECT	POSSESSIVE PRONOUN	POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVE	REFLEXIVE
<b>she</b> <i>She bought a coffee</i>	<b>her</b> <i>I bought her a coffee</i>	<b>hers</b> <i>This coffee is hers</i>	<b>her</b> <i>I asked for her coffee order</i>	<b>herself</b> <i>She bought the coffee herself</i>
<b>he</b> <i>He bought a coffee</i>	<b>him</b> <i>I bought him a coffee</i>	<b>his</b> <i>This coffee is his</i>	<b>his</b> <i>I asked for his coffee order</i>	<b>himself</b> <i>He bought the coffee himself</i>
<b>they</b> <i>They bought a coffee</i>	<b>them</b> <i>I bought them a coffee</i>	<b>theirs</b> <i>This coffee is theirs</i>	<b>their</b> <i>I asked for their coffee order</i>	<b>themselves</b> <i>They bought the coffee themselves</i>
<b>ze</b> pronounced 'ze' <i>Ze bought a coffee</i>	<b>hir</b> (pronounced 'here') <i>I bought hir a coffee</i>	<b>hirs</b> <i>This coffee is hirs</i>	<b>hir</b> <i>I asked for hir coffee order</i>	<b>hirsself</b> <i>They bought the coffee hirsself</i>
<b>[Name]</b> e.g. Jo <i>Jo bought a coffee</i>	<b>[Name]</b> e.g. Jo <i>I bought Jo a coffee</i>	<b>[Name]'s</b> e.g. Jo <i>This coffee is Jo's</i>	<b>[Name]'s</b> e.g. Jo <i>I asked for Jo's coffee order</i>	<b>n/a</b> (use themselves for a gender neutral option)

# WHY DO PRONOUNS MATTER?

Which pronoun we use for a person is often determined by assumptions on that person's gender, based upon their appearance or name. However, when making an assumption, there is the very real possibility that we will be incorrect. In addition, the idea that we are able to make an assumption about someone's gender on this basis is rooted in less progressive ideas of gender identity. These assumptions follow a [binary view of gender](#), limiting the options to either 'she' or 'he', whereas some people don't identify as a man or a woman

and may use a different pronoun. It is also important to note that a person's gender identity can be fluid and may develop over time, and their pronouns may change to reflect this.

Using the wrong pronouns for someone can cause that person to feel invalidated, similar to how it would feel to continually be referred to by the wrong name. Incorrectly assuming someone's pronouns can cause this kind of discomfort, but the impact is amplified if someone is intentionally or repeatedly addressed by the incorrect

pronouns. Behaviour such as this is offensive, and carries the implication that a person's gender identity is not valid or worthy of respect. The experience of being continually misgendered can have lasting, negative consequences on a person's self confidence, self worth, and mental health. Intentionally misgendering someone is an example of harassment and goes against our anti-harassment policy and the [Springer Nature Code of Conduct](#).



*Using the wrong pronouns for someone can cause that person to feel invalidated.*



## MAKE YOUR PRONOUNS KNOWN IF YOU ARE COMFORTABLE DOING SO

Share your pronouns when you have the opportunity to do so, regardless of whether people usually use the correct pronouns for you. For example, pronouns can be included in your email signature, can be stated when introducing yourself at the beginning of a meeting or when conducting an interview, or can be written on your name tag when attending an event. This normalises the sharing of pronouns and will make others, particularly trans and non-binary people, feel more comfortable to share theirs, as well as reinforcing the point that a person's pronouns shouldn't be assumed. Sharing your pronouns can also be helpful if your name isn't exclusively associated with a particular gender or may be unfamiliar to people from a different country or culture. However, it should never be made mandatory to share pronouns as some people may not feel comfortable doing so and it's a personal choice.

### Some suggestions for how to share your pronouns:

*"My pronouns are [he/him/his]"*

*"I use [she/her] pronouns"*

*"I use [ze/hir] pronouns"*

People may not be used to sharing pronouns in these ways, and it can be useful to be ready with [answers to questions](#) about why you are doing this. Senior leaders or managers are well placed to lead by example in meetings and in the workplace in general.

## ASK WHAT PRONOUNS SOMEONE USES

The easiest way to find out what someone's pronouns are is to respectfully ask them. When introducing yourself to someone, you can share your pronouns first and then ask which pronouns to use for them.

Once you know someone's pronouns, remember to use them. If you are unsure of someone's pronouns you can use their name or gender neutral 'they' instead.

### Some suggestions for how to respectfully ask someone their pronouns:

*"My pronouns are [he/him], what pronouns do you use?"*

*"May I ask what pronouns you use? I use [they/them]"*

*"I use [she/her] pronouns. When I refer to you, which pronouns should I use?"*

*"Are you comfortable sharing your pronouns?"*

It's worth remembering that the phrase 'preferred pronouns' is no longer used. Terms like this make it sound like someone's gender is up for debate and that it's just a preference rather than a true reflection of their identity.

## CORRECT MISTAKES

People make mistakes. If you get someone's pronouns wrong, it's important that you recognise the mistake and take steps to fix it. How you do this will be dependent on the situation in which it happens and when you realise that you have made a mistake. If

you realise in the moment, you can quickly apologise and correct yourself immediately, without making a big deal of it or drawing too much attention to the situation. In other scenarios, it may be more appropriate to approach the person later on to apologise rather than derailing the conversation at the time. Be mindful of what the person wants – they may be happy to talk with you in depth or prefer to move on without discussing it.

You can also correct others if they make mistakes, even if the person they are speaking about isn't there.

Again the approach you take is dependent on the particular situation, how much you understand about how widely the person wants their pronouns to be used and whether they would want you to actively correct others. You could simply refer to someone with their correct pronouns immediately after someone has used incorrect ones, without explicitly pointing out that a mistake has been made.



**THANK  
YOU**

#### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Visit the  
[SN Pride hive group](#)

Email  
[snpride@springernature.com](mailto:snpride@springernature.com)

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For more advice regarding the use of pronouns and inclusive language please visit:

LGBTQ+ Basics Guide:  
<https://hive.springernature.com/docs/DOC-205113>

Inclusive language guide:  
<https://hive.springernature.com/docs/DOC-207041>

MyPronouns.org:  
<https://www.mypronouns.org/>

Stonewall - International Pronouns Day:  
<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/international-pronouns-day>