

A Primer on Pronouns

The ACLU of Arizona encourages community members to share their pronouns when introducing themselves, and to politely and respectfully ask what pronouns other people use rather than making assumptions based on someone's name, body type, or physical appearance.

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are words like he, she, or they that are used to refer to someone when not using their name. For example, let's pretend the ACLU of Arizona is writing about three volunteers (pronouns are in bold to make them easier to spot):

ACLU of Arizona volunteers Sara (**she/her**), Pablo (**he/him**), and Lucia (**they/them**) collected signatures last week in Tucson. Sara has volunteered with the ACLU of Arizona since 2003, when **she** was a high school senior. Lucia juggled, and used **their** juggling skills to get the attention of passers-by, while Pablo handed out buttons. At only six years old, Pablo was the youngest volunteer and brought some of **his** toys to keep **himself** occupied.

Why are pronouns important?

Not all people use pronouns in exactly the same way, and it's not possible to tell what pronouns someone uses just by looking at them. Calling someone by the *correct* name and pronouns is a sign of respect, and being referred to by the *wrong* name or pronouns—which is sometimes called “misgendering”—can feel like a personal attack. This is especially true for many transgender people, as others may use the wrong name or pronoun as a way to dismiss or deny that person's authentic gender identity.

Whatever happened to ‘preferred pronouns’?

You may have heard someone use the phrase ‘preferred pronouns,’ but these days more and more people leave off the ‘preferred’ to plainly say ‘pronouns.’ That's because the word ‘preferred’ may unintentionally imply that someone's pronouns aren't real, or that using a person's correct pronouns is simply a preference (like a favorite flavor of ice cream) rather than a matter of basic dignity and respect.

What if I am having trouble remembering someone's pronoun?

There are several ways you can practice someone's pronouns, including writing out a story about them or looking at a picture of the person and repeating their pronouns. The important thing is that you should practice proactively and on your own time.

What if I use the wrong pronoun when referring to someone?

Everyone makes mistakes, and what to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone will depend on the situation and the individual person. That said, it's generally a good idea to acknowledge that you made a mistake, apologize for the error, and work to make sure it doesn't happen again. This can be as simple as: “I'm sorry I used the wrong pronoun. I know your pronouns are he/him, not she/her. I'll do better in the future.”

What are “gender-neutral” pronouns?

There are many different gender-neutral pronouns in English, but the most common one is “they, them, theirs,” which is what Lucia uses in the example above.

Using they/them/theirs to refer to a single person may take some practice, particularly if you’re not used to using they/them to talk about a single individual. But one of the wonderful things about languages is that they change and evolve, and using they/them as a singular pronoun is supported by the Oxford English Dictionary, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the AP Manual of Style, the Chicago Manual of Style, and many other language and style guides and organizations.

How can I support the transgender community through my use of pronouns?

Sharing your own pronouns is a great way to model good behavior for others. You can share your pronouns when introducing yourself, add space for pronouns on name tags, include your pronouns in your email signature, add your pronouns when participating in online video calls, ask (but not require!) people to share their pronouns when making group introductions, and help gently correct others when they use the wrong pronouns for someone else.

All of these steps help transgender people by making it less scary to share their own pronouns and by helping to correct others when they make a mistake.

What about languages other than English?

Some languages, including Spanish, assign masculine or feminine gender to all nouns and adjectives, which can create a challenge for gender neutral language. Some Spanish-speaking trans communities advocate replacing the gender-specific ‘a’ (feminine) and ‘o’ (masculine) with a neutral ‘e,’ while others use an ‘x’ or ‘@’ to indicate gender-neutral language. These changes transform latino (masculine) and latina (feminine) to latine [pronounced LAH-TEEN-AY], latinx [pronounced LAH-TEEN-EX] or latin@ [often spoken as LAH-TEEN-OH-AH].

These types of language changes are not universally accepted, however, and may receive criticism. Because there are not yet any universally agreed-upon ways to make languages gender neutral, it is best to ask individual groups and advocates what works best for them—one size does not fit all.

Native and indigenous communities may conceive of gender differently than the words or concepts that exist in English. Navajo culture, for example, recognizes four genders and has gender identities that may not easily translate into other languages.

It is beyond the scope of this guide to offer specific rules or guidelines for these situations, other than to say that these are ongoing conversations and there may not be a single option that pleases everyone who speaks a particular language.