



CALTECH CENTER FOR DIVERSITY

Gender Pronouns: A Guide for Faculty, Staff, and Allies



What is a pronoun?

A pronoun is any word that can replace a noun or noun phrase (*I, you, them*).

What is a gender pronoun?

Gender pronouns refer specifically to people that are being talked about (*he, she, him, his, her, they, them*). There are no “male/female” or “man/woman” pronouns. All pronouns can be used for any gender and are gender neutral. We have moved away from the language of “preferred pronouns” due to people generally not having a pronoun “preference” but simply having “pronouns.” Using “preferred” can accidentally insinuate that using the correct pronouns for someone is optional.

What kind of pronouns can be used?

These are not the only pronouns. There are an infinite number of pronouns as new ones emerge in our language. Always ask someone for their pronouns. Some people prefer to not use pronouns, and would like their names to be used instead.

| Gendered Pronouns | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| She | <i>She</i> laughed | I called <i>her</i> | <i>Her</i> hair | That is <i>hers</i> | She likes <i>herself</i> |
| He | <i>He</i> laughed | I called <i>him</i> | <i>His</i> hair | That is <i>his</i> | He likes <i>himself</i> |
| All Gender/Gender Neutral Pronouns | | | | | |
| They | <i>They</i> laughed | I called <i>them</i> | <i>Their</i> hair | That is <i>theirs</i> | They like <i>themselves</i> |
| Spivak | <u><i>Ey</i></u> laughed | I called <u><i>em</i></u> | <u><i>Eir</i></u> hair | That is <u><i>eirs</i></u> | <u><i>Ey</i></u> likes <u><i>emself</i></u> |
| Ze | <i>Ze</i> laughed | I called <i>ze</i> | <u><i>Ze's</i></u> hair | That is <u><i>zes</i></u> | Ze likes <u><i>zeself</i></u> |
| Ze & Hir | <i>Ze</i> laughed | I called <i>hir</i> | <i>Hir</i> hair | That is <u><i>hirs</i></u> | Ze likes <u><i>hirself</i></u> |
| Xe | <u><i>Xe</i></u> laughed | I called <u><i>xem</i></u> | <u><i>Xyr</i></u> hair | That is <u><i>xvrs</i></u> | <u><i>Xe</i></u> likes <u><i>xemself</i></u> |
| Yo | <u><i>Yo</i></u> laughed | I called <i>yon</i> | <u><i>Yos</i></u> hair | That is <u><i>yos</i></u> | <u><i>Yo</i></u> likes <u><i>yoself</i></u> |

Why is it important to respect pronouns as faculty staff members, or allies?

You can't always tell someone's pronoun by looking at a person. Faculty and Staff are often in positions of power, so by respecting one's pronoun consistently, you set an example for peers and other students.

When someone is referred to by the wrong pronoun, it can make the person feel disrespected and alienated.

Inquiring about pronouns is a simple way to show that you want to cultivate an environment that respects all gender identities.

It may feel offensive to ask for pronouns, because society has taught us that identifying outside of the binary is abnormal, and you don't want to suggest someone is abnormal, but the truth is, it is not offensive, it's incredibly necessary, and a way to be inclusive. If a person responds with "Why would you ask that, isn't it obvious?" you can simply say, "I always default to asking over assuming." If you want to take it step further you can talk about how people can be mis-gendered on a daily basis and you're doing your part to be inclusive. By not assuming gender pronouns you are helping to make a learning and work environment that is more comfortable for everyone.

How should I ask what someone's pronoun is?

You can simply ask **"What pronouns do you use?"** to an individual in private.

This may feel uncomfortable at first, but you do not want to say the wrong pronouns based on assumptions, and the student will most likely appreciate your effort.

You can also ask about pronouns as part of a group exercise, which would allow you to explain to the group why asking rather than assuming someone's pronouns is important. You could say something like: **"Everyone tell your name, a fun fact about you, and your pronouns. A gender pronoun is the pronoun you like to be referred to with. For example, my pronouns are she, her, and hers."**

When taking attendance, one method is to call roll by last name, and have students respond with their preferred name and pronouns.

If you make a mistake: That's okay! If you use the wrong pronoun, apologize, correct it, and then move on. Avoid continually talking about how bad you feel for making the mistake, for it makes the person feel like they need to console you. If you forget someone's pronoun, follow the same protocol: **apologize, correct it, and move on.**

If other students or faculty are using the wrong pronoun for a person, try to correct it by saying something like "Actually, Alex prefers the pronoun *she*."

If students or faculty continue to use the wrong pronoun, do not ignore it. It might help to ask the individual who has been misidentified if they would like you to take the person aside and remind them of the proper pronoun. Steps like this let the person know you are an ally.

Never refer to a person as "it" or "he-she," unless the individual requests that you do so.

More ways to be pro-active around this topic: include you pronouns in your email signature or add them to your class syllabus, consider substituting language such as everybody, folks, or this person for gender binary language: *ladies, gentleman, boys and girls, he or she*.