What are “personal pronouns”? A "personal pronoun" is the pronoun that a person chooses to use for themself. For example: If Amanda’s personal pronouns are she, her, and hers, you could say "Amanda ate her food because she was hungry."

- **She, her, hers** and **he, him, his** are the most commonly used pronouns. Some people call these "female/feminine" and "male/masculine" pronouns, but many avoid these labels because, for example, not everyone who uses he feels like a "male" or "masculine."

- **There are also many gender-neutral pronouns in use.** Here are a few you might hear:
  - **They, them, theirs** (Sam ate their food because they were hungry.)
    This is a pretty common gender-neutral pronoun.... And yes, it can in fact be used in the singular.
  - **Ze, hir** (Rob ate hir food because ze was hungry.)
    Ze is pronounced like “zee” can also be spelled zie or xe, and replaces she/he/they.
    Hir is pronounced like "here" and replaces her/hers/him/his/they/theirs.

- **Just my name please!** (Frank ate Frank’s food because Frank was hungry)
  Some people don’t use pronouns at all, using their name as a pronoun instead.

- **Never, ever refer to a person as “it” or “he-she”.** These are offensive slurs used against trans and gender non-conforming individuals. If you do not know someone’s personal pronouns, you can just use their name.

- **Please note:** Many languages outside of English also grapple with how to have pronouns best reflect gender experience (e.g. Latinx), In language classes (especially when the language is gendered, such as Spanish, Arabic, etc.), note that personal pronouns should also apply to any statements that would indicate a student’s gender. Faculty, TFs and students should take care to address each other with the correct gender verb or adjective, just as they do the correct gender pronouns.

Why is it important to respect students’ personal pronouns as an educator?

- You can’t always know what someone’s personal pronoun is by looking at them.
- Asking and correctly using someone’s personal pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity.
- When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above.)
• It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else's gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive.

• As a faculty member or teaching fellow, you are often in a position of power. Consistently using students’ correct personal pronouns can determine within the first few minutes if they will feel respected in your classroom.

• **You will be setting an example for your students:** If you are consistent about using someone’s personal pronouns, they will follow your example. Some of your students will be learning about personal pronouns for the first time, so **this will be a learning opportunity** for them that they will keep forever.

• **Discussing and correctly using personal pronouns sets a tone of respect and allyship that trans and gender non-conforming students do not take for granted.** It can truly make all of the difference, especially for incoming first-year students that may feel particularly vulnerable, friendless, and scared.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**How do I ask my students about their personal pronouns?**

• There are a variety of ways that you can ask your students about their personal pronouns.

  ○ **Over email or online form:** You can send a get-to-know-you email or online form to all of your students. In addition to asking them about their academic and extracurricular interests, hometown, dorm, etc., you can ask them to share their pronouns, if they feel comfortable doing so. This should always be optional and confidential, as some students may not want to share their pronouns.

  ○ **In person:** Introduce yourself with your name and pronouns so that your students feel more comfortable doing the same. Do not make it seem as though all students must share their pronouns, or ask specific students their pronouns, because this can be isolating for students who are uncomfortable sharing their pronouns.

• If some students are not familiar with sharing pronouns or personal pronouns, you can quickly explain by saying something like this: “Pronouns are how people refer to you when they aren’t using your name. For example, I'm Caitlin, I'm from New York, and I like to be referred to with she, her, and hers pronouns. So you could say, 'she went to her car’ if you were talking about me.”

**What if I make a mistake?**
• It's okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like "Sorry, I meant she." If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on.
• A lot of the time it can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right. But please, don't! It is inappropriate and makes the person who was mis-gendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you, which is absolutely not their job. It is your job to remember people's pronouns.
• To prevent mistakes in the first place, it is helpful to practice. Before class or meeting with each student, remind yourself of their name and personal pronouns. "I am meeting with Kate this afternoon. She is from Minnesota. I should ask her about the best winter sports to watch."

Taking an active role
• In your classes or meetings, you may hear one of your students or colleagues using the wrong pronoun for someone. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been mis-gendered. This means saying something like "Actually, Jess takes the pronoun she," and then moving on. If other students or staff are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let your student know that you are their ally.
• It may be appropriate to approach them and say something like "I noticed that you were getting referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier, and I know that that can be really hurtful. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your personal pronouns? I want to make sure that this group is a safe space for you." Follow up if necessary, but take your cues from the comfort level of your student. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.
Additional Harvard Resources

**Harvard College Women’s Center**  
(Canaday B Basement, hcwc@fas.harvard.edu)  
The Harvard College Women’s Center is an office that aims to promote gender equity through supporting individual students and student groups. The Women’s Center is committed to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all genders that encourages dialogue and diversity.

**Office of BGLTQ Student Life**  
(Grays Hall, Lower Level, rear entrance, bgltq@fas.harvard.edu)  
The Harvard College Office of BGLTQ Student Life provides support, resources, and leadership development for bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, and questioning students.

**Contact Peer Counseling**  
(Thayer Basement, 617–495–8111)  
(Hotline and Drop-In Hours: Thurs. – Sun. 8 pm – 1 am)  
All Contact staff members share a deep concern about issues of sexual orientation, sex, sexuality and relationships and are interested in discussion of these topics.

**SHADE**  
(Harvardshade@gmail.com)  
Shade is an organization made by and for LGBTQ+ people of color to build community and have safe social spaces and programming made specifically with QTPOCs in mind.

**Trans Task Force**  
(transtaskforce@gmail.com)  
Trans Task Force is a student organization that provides a safe space for all individuals, regardless of gender identity, to talk about gender identity and the issues around it.

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