GENDER 101 RESOURCE SHEET

Personal Pronouns: A Resource Sheet for Student Organizations

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/their.
- **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 others’ pronouns as a student or member of an organization?
- You can’t always know what someone’s pronoun is by looking at them.

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Asking and correctly using someone's 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. You have the opportunity to shape the behavior of your peers or culture of your organization and consistently using others' correct pronouns can determine within the first few minutes if they feel respected in your organization.

You will be setting an example for others: If you are consistent about using someone's pronouns, others will follow your example. Some people may be learning about pronouns for the first time, so this will be a learning opportunity for them that they will keep forever.

Discussing and correctly using pronouns sets a tone of respect and allyship that trans and gender non-conforming folks 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 someone about their pronouns?

- Try asking: "What are your pronouns?" or "Which pronouns do you like to hear?" or "Can you remind me which pronouns you like for yourself?" It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as getting it wrong or making a hurtful assumption.
- If some people are not familiar with sharing 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 meetings with different people, 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 a person 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, David prefers the pronoun he," and then moving on. **If other students, staff, or faculty are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let people 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 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 the person. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.**