
Why Pronouns Matter



Pronouns are everywhere. We use them every day in speech and in writing to take the place of people’s names. We use them without even thinking about it, but have you ever tried speaking without using any pronouns? Give it a try. Whoops, I meant to say “Give speaking *without using any pronouns* a try.” It’s not easy, is it?

Pronouns may not seem like that big a deal, but they become a bigger deal when you try to live without them. And for some people, pronouns are a big deal because other folks don’t always use the correct pronouns to describe them. **Asking someone’s pronouns** simply means asking someone what the most respectful way to refer to them is, if you’re not using their name.

In English, the singular pronouns that we use most frequently are: I, you, she, her, he, him, and it. “I”, “you” and “it” are what we call “gender neutral” or “all gender”, but “she”, “her”, “he” and “him” are gendered. This can create an issue for transgender and gender nonconforming people, because others may not use the pronouns they prefer when speaking to them or about them.

One way to make sure that your GSA or club is being inclusive and welcoming for transgender or other gender nonconforming people is to incorporate pronouns into your regular intro activities. If you start every meeting by having those present share their names, ask them to share their pronouns as well. For example: “My name is Jasmine, I’m a sophomore, and my pronouns are ‘she’ and ‘her’.” “Hi, I’m Diego. I’m 17, a senior, and my pronouns are ‘he’, ‘him’, and ‘his’.”

Some people prefer that you use gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns when talking to or about them. In English, the most commonly used singular gender neutral pronouns are **ze** (sometimes spelled **zie**) and **hir**. “Ze” is the subject pronoun and is pronounced /zee/, and “hir” is the object and possessive pronoun and is pronounced /heer/. This is how they are used: “Chris is the tallest person in class, and ze is also the fastest runner.” “Tanzen is going to Hawaii over break with hir parents. I’m so jealous of hir.”

Remember: Just like sexual orientation, a person’s gender identity can be a very personal and private thing. GSA members (or anyone, for that matter) should never feel pressured to share how they identify. If someone does choose to share, that’s great, and that information should remain confidential within the GSA unless that person has specifically said that it’s okay to talk about elsewhere. Additionally, do not assume that someone’s pronouns are the same as their gender identity. Could a person identify as female and also prefer he/him/his? Sure!

We should also remember that the idea of pronouns and gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns will be a new concept to a lot of folks, and that mistakes will happen. The activity on the next page will help you gain more practice using gender-neutral pronouns.

Activity

As a group, decide on a plot for a short story (about a paragraph in length). Each member of the group will get a slip of paper with a set of gender-neutral pronouns on it. Facilitators of the activity will randomly choose one or two people (depending on the number of participants) who will need to intentionally use the wrong pronouns at least once (e.g. he/him/his instead of per/per/pers, not using the grammatically wrong form). Each person will write a version of the same story using the pronouns that they were assigned. After everyone has had an opportunity to write their story, each participant will take a turn reading their story (you can make it interesting while following a set plot line!). If the person reading the story makes a mistake, anyone not reading should correct them. After everyone has read, the group will discuss the experience of using gender-neutral pronouns and how it felt both to correct people and to be corrected.

Handy dandy list of pronouns! The list of pronouns being used in the English language is ever growing, so here is a very short list of some of the ones we know. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, and we plan to keep it updated as much as we can. If you know of a set of pronouns that should be on this list, let us know!

Additionally, more and more people are using “they”, “them”, and “their(s)” as singular, gender inclusive pronouns, even though these have been traditionally used as plural pronouns.

A (Very Short) List of Pronouns

SUBJECT PRONOUN	OBJECT PRONOUN	POSSESSIVE PRONOUN	REFLEXIVE PRONOUN
____ is an activist.	I am proud of ____.	That is ____ book. -or- That book is ____.	That person likes ____.
She	her	her/hers	herself
He	him	his	himself
Ze*	hir	hir/hirs	hirsself
Ze*	zir	zir/zirs	zirsself
E or Ey	em	eir/eirs	eirsself or emself
Per	per	per/pers	Perself
Hu	hum	hus/hus	Humself
They (are)**	them	their/theirs	Themselves
Name	Name	Name’s/Name’s	Name
Fae	faer	faer/faers	faerself

*Additional alternate spellings for “ze” are “zie”, “sie”, “xie”, and “xe.”

**When using “they” as a singular gender inclusive pronoun, you would still conjugate associated verbs as you would for the plural version, as in “they are an activist” or “they like to go shopping”, not “they is an activist” or “they likes to go shopping.”

Note: Some people point out that using the pronouns “they/them/theirs” is grammatically incorrect. It is far more important to be inclusive and respectful of all people than it is to be grammatically correct. If someone uses the pronouns “they/them/theirs”, use them, even if you object grammatically. If it helps, the Oxford English Dictionary says that “they” and “them” can be either plural or singular pronouns.

Another Note: Pronoun choices are very personal. There can be as many pronouns as there are unique identities (i.e. an infinite amount). This list is only meant to provide a basic sampling of some of the more common sets of pronouns.

*A revised edition of GSAFE’s “What The Heck is a PGP?” resource
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