



Pronouns – A Guide to their use.

Background

WHAT ARE PRONOUNS?

Pronouns are words used in place of a noun (a name of a person or object). The most used pronouns are *personal pronouns* because they refer to people. Personal Pronouns include; I, You, He or She.

Pronouns are a way people can refer to each other or themselves, when are not using their name. We use them so we don't have to repeat a person's name over and over again. E.g. this sounds clunky:



“**Chris** made pasta. **Chris** put cheese on top and gave me a bowl. Then **Chris** and I sat at the table and we ate.”

However, when we use Chris' pronoun (they/them) it sounds clearer.



“**Chris** made pasta. **They** put cheese on top and gave me a bowl. Then **they** and I sat at the table and we ate.”

Pronouns often indicate a person's gender; however, we often make assumptions about people's genders and assign them pronouns. We do this based on what we can see; their appearance, their name, how they sound on the phone and other indicators (that are often based upon gender stereotypes). Sometimes this is incorrect.

- Most men (including trans men) use the pronoun 'he',
- Most women (including trans women) use the pronoun 'she',
- Some people (including some non-binary people) use gender-neutral pronoun such as 'they.'

Types of Pronouns

Pronouns are generally grouped by whether they are 'gendered' or 'gender-neutral'.

Gendered pronouns include:

- he/him/his
- she/her/hers

Gender-neutral pronouns include:

- they/them/theirs

Using gender-neutral pronouns for a singular person is not only grammatically correct but have been around for centuries. Gender-neutral pronouns are also a polite and easy way to refer to someone whose gender you're unsure of.

Some people use neo-pronouns, such as: xe/xem/xyr, ze/hir/hirs, ey/em/eir. Neo (or new) pronouns may be used as an alternative to 'they'. While the most common neo-pronouns were introduced in the late 20th century, they have been documented in some English dialects since the 18th century. In Australia, the most common 'gender-neutral' pronouns used are They/Them/Theirs.

Why is using the right pronouns important?

Using the language people ask us to use for them is not only polite, it's the right thing to do. Whether someone is using new language for the first time, or has been using it for years, it's just as important to make sure the ways we refer to them are correct and affirming.

Using the right pronoun for a person is one of the easiest ways of showing them respect. For many trans people, having people know and use correct pronouns is an important and validating part of their gender affirmation. For many trans people, it's also important to use the right language for them even when talking about them historically, including their pronouns. If this feels difficult, try to think about using their name instead so you get the hang of not using old and incorrect language.



"As **she** mentioned **Jo** recently affirmed **her** gender as a woman publicly. When **she** was a child **she** known by a different name"

Sometimes it can take a while to get used to the new words someone uses to talk about themselves, but using them and celebrating these changes are a great way to show them that you care about who they are, and are taking their lead that what they are telling you is important.

By asking and knowing about pronouns you are also indicating to others that you have an understanding that trans and non-binary people exist and are important. It is a great way to flag that you have an awareness of the needs of the sexuality and gender diverse communities. Like displaying a rainbow flag, asking about pronouns is a visible way to show your inclusion, without the other person having to disclose first. It provides a signal that you and your service is welcoming and inclusive.

How do I know which pronoun to use when referring to others?

You can't know someone's pronouns from looking at them or simply by their name. The best and only way to find out someone's pronoun is to ask them – preferably privately and respectfully.



"What is your pronoun?" or "Which pronouns do you use?"

"Hi, my name is Nic, my pronouns are she/her or they/them"

Here are some other ways you can normalise asking about pronouns:

- Provide your pronouns when introducing yourself (above)
- Put your pronouns on your email signature
- Use your pronouns with your name on your virtual meeting platforms
- If you're running a program/service, add 'Pronouns' as a field to be completed in your registration forms, and have a process to make sure they are communicated to relevant people.
- Add pronouns to you name badges

While this can feel awkward or unfamiliar at first; over time and with practice it will become a usual part of your language... and it's a lot less awkward than making assumptions and misgendering people!

What happens if I make a mistake?

If you make a mistake, it's OK, you're human! Everyone slips up from time to time.



Do: apologise, correct your mistake and move on!



Don't: make a big deal about it, go on and on about how bad you feel.

If you make a big deal about the mistake this is highlighting the situation and could make the person you misgendered feel even more uncomfortable.

Learning to use pronouns differently or learning to use a different pronoun for someone you know, can take time and practise. That is perfectly normal. A good idea is to practise in private on your own or with a friend you trust. With time, it will become a normal part of your vocabulary.

How do I practice using gender-neutral pronouns?

You already do use them! Think about the following scenario and how you naturally use gender-neutral language every day.

Pronoun Practice



You find a phone on the bus. You give it to the bus driver. What do you say? 'Someone lost **their** phone. I bet **they** want it back. Can you give it to **them** if **they** report it lost?'

Minus18 also has an app where you can practice your pronouns in a game style: <https://pronouns.minus18.org.au/>

Play 20 Questions - Describe a celebrity to the group using only gender-neutral pronouns, first one to correctly guess within 20 questions wins.

What do I do if I hear someone using the wrong pronoun?

There may be a time where you overhear or have a conversation with someone and notice they keep saying the wrong pronoun when referring to someone. You must speak up for the person who is being talked about.

- Correct/remind the person immediately by saying something like "Chris uses they/them pronouns" and then move on.
- If you don't feel comfortable correcting the person in front of others, take them aside afterwards and have a conversation with them about how important pronouns are and what getting them right means to people.
- If the person making a mistake is someone who you don't feel you can approach (such as a senior manager) you can mention the incident to your manager and ask them to escalate the issue.
- Deliberate and persistent misgendering (and using the wrong pronouns) is a form of discrimination and should be reported via your usual complaints mechanism.

What should I avoid doing to be respectful and inclusive?

- Avoid using the phrase ‘preferred pronouns’ as the choice of pronoun people use is not a preference. The pronouns someone uses ARE who they identify as.
- When providing pronoun options (e.g. on forms) always include gender-neutral options such as They/them/theirs and, where possible, a free text option.
- Do not have “other” as an option. If you would like the person to self-select use “not listed above” with a free text space.
- NEVER NEVER NEVER use the term ‘it’ as a gender-neutral personal pronoun. It is disrespectful.

More Pronoun Practice **In small groups walk practice what you would say:**



A person walks into your service who has indicated their gender identity is ‘Male’ yet is wearing a dress. How do you determine their pronouns and make them welcome?

A new colleague starts in your team and when they applied for the job described their gender as “gender-fluid.” How would you introduce them to the team and ask them about themselves?

Someone asks you why you have your pronouns on your email signature by saying “But of course you’re a she! Why do you have to rub it in my face?” How would you respond?

You hear another service user/client refer to a trans woman as “it” how would handle the situation or correct them?

You are referring a service user/client to another service for additional support. Their name is Nic, but you can’t find their gender listed anywhere – practice doing a phone referral for Nic without assuming their gender.

More resources

- [Minus18 pronoun Video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xpvricekxU&feature=emb_title): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xpvricekxU&feature=emb_title
- [ACON Pronoun badges](https://www.pridetraining.org.au/collections/shop): <https://www.pridetraining.org.au/collections/shop>

Further Assistance

For any queries or support please contact [Claire Allen](#), National Program Manager, Pride in Health + Wellbeing (0419 583 034).