



Pronouns at Work

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are used to refer to someone or something that is being talked about, for example “she”, “them”, “this” and “it”.

We use gender pronouns (e.g. “she/her”, “he/him” and “they/them”) to refer to people without using their name. We may assume a person’s gender based on their name, appearance, voice, and/or expression, and “assign” a pronoun, however this may not always be correct.

Why are pronouns important?

A person’s identity is very important to them. Being mis-identified (accidentally or on purpose) is uncomfortable for all parties and can be offensive (and can be a form of harassment).

At a global university such as UCL, many names might be unfamiliar to someone from a different cultural background. For example, varying naming conventions – such as putting the family name first, or what genders are traditionally associated with a name (if any) – can potentially lead to confusion. This isn’t a bad thing, as it can demonstrate the importance of not assuming pronouns.

For trans and non-binary people pronouns can be particularly important to affirm their gender identity.

What if I do not know which pronoun to use?

Take your lead from the person and use the pronouns they do. Those identifying as non-binary may choose to use ‘they’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’, or may use other pronouns entirely, such as ‘ze’ or ‘zir’. Someone may want multiple pronouns to be used for them; some people may wish pronouns to be avoided wherever possible and for others to only use their name when mentioning them. Pronouns do not always match what someone may think based on a person’s gender expression, so it is important to follow their lead.

If you are unsure, ask. Never assume. “They” can and should be used to refer to an individual whose gender identity is not known. In colloquial English we already do this all the time: “Oh, someone left **their** umbrella here; I hope **they** come back for it – it’s pouring”.

Other gender-neutral language such as “colleagues”, “students”, “team members”, “participants”, should also be used generically.

Isn’t it rude to ask someone for their pronouns?

The more we ask everyone for their pronouns (and state our own pronouns), the more it becomes part of the status quo. Avoid asking only people with what you consider to be an unusual gender presentation as that would be rude and potentially awkward.

Is “they” really a plural pronoun?

It is a common misconception that this usage is new and ungrammatical; in fact, it has precedence

dating back to the 1300s and is recognised by the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

What if I make a mistake?

It happens. Just apologise briefly and try your best to try not to do it again.

What if I see someone else makes a mistake?

It depends! Is the person being referred to there? Do they definitely use pronouns other than the ones you just heard being used? Do they use them publicly and/or in the context (work, family, etc.) you are in? Have you heard them correct others before? Have you talked to them previously? The answers to these questions will likely determine what the most appropriate course of action would be. This may sound convoluted, but such considerations soon become second nature.

Once you have determined that it's appropriate to intervene, you might want to gently correct the person on the spot, either directly – “Oh, just a note, Adam uses they/them pronouns” – or indirectly – “Adam said that **they** would be able to get the draft report done by Friday”. Another option could be to take them aside privately.

What can I do to help?

Many colleagues have added their pronouns to their email signatures. This is a simple and visible way to remind others that pronouns cannot be assumed and to show your support. It is something everybody can do so think about sharing pronouns during introductions at meetings -- for example, “I’m Jane Smith, my pronouns are she/her, and I work in Department X”.

Use gender-neutral language and terms as a way of encouraging others to do so too.

Where can I find further guidance?

Visit the Human Rights Campaign [Website](#), where you can download their “[Talking About Pronouns in the Workplace](#)” guide.

Trans: an umbrella term that is seen to be inclusive of anyone whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Trans or Transgender man: someone may use this term to describe themselves if they were assigned female at birth, but identify as a man.

Trans or Transgender women: someone may use this term to describe themselves if they were assigned male at birth, but identify as a woman.

Non-Binary (also Gender Queer / Gender Fluid): some individuals do not identify as either male or female. It is important to recognise that some individuals may not want to be referred to as either ‘he’ or ‘she’, but rather as pronouns that are not gendered such as ‘they’ or ‘ze’. Someone may want multiple, or even any, pronouns to be used for them; some people may wish pronouns to be avoided wherever possible and for others to only use their name when mentioning them.

Transsexual: This is an older term to describe someone who has transitioned or intends to do so. While some may still prefer to be referred to as transsexual, many will prefer transgender.

It is best not to assume how someone identifies but to ask which terms they use and then use those terms.