
THIRD-PERSON PRONOUNS: WHY, WHAT, AND HOW?

Why Do Pronouns Matter?

Nothing may be more personal than the way in which people refer to us through our name and pronouns. Using a person's chosen name and pronouns is an important way to respect them, affirm their identity, and create an inclusive environment.

People frequently make assumptions about the gender of another person based on their appearance or name, and use a common pronoun like "he" or "she." It is important to remember that **gender identity is not visible; it is an internal sense of one's own gender.** Making an assumption, even if correct, sends a harmful message: that people have to look a certain way to demonstrate the gender that they are or they are not.

Using incorrect pronouns causes harm. When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (often all of the above). Deliberately misusing a person's chosen name and/or pronouns is unlawful harassment per the Colorado Civil Rights Commission ([3 CCR 708-1](#)).

What are Third-Person Pronouns?

People may refer to us using third-person pronouns when speaking about us when we are in groups, or when we are not with them. The most commonly used pronouns imply a binary (male or female) gender identity, such as "he, him, his" and "she, her, hers." These common pronouns may be used by people who have transitioned from the sex they were assigned at birth to the other binary gender identity (i.e., a person assigned female at birth who identifies as male).

Some people with gender identities other than male or female, such as [non-binary](#) individuals, may use less common pronouns outside of the gender binary, such as "they, them, theirs" or "zie, zim, zir." Some people use no pronouns, and use their name. If you are unsure how to use less common pronouns or no pronouns, there are online resources, such as [mypronouns.org](#) and [grammarly](#), to help.

Just like how appearances do not indicate identities, we cannot make assumptions about someone's identity based on their pronouns. People of all gender identities use many different types of pronouns.

How do I use and respect pronouns?

YOU can create a culture where everyone feels comfortable introducing themselves with pronouns.

A culture that readily asks for and provides pronouns is one committed to reducing the risk of disrespect or embarrassment for all. The only way to really know how someone will feel respected is to ask what pronouns they go by. However, we *never* force someone to share their pronouns.

- **Share:** You can encourage the use of pronouns by regularly introducing yourself with pronouns, including your pronouns in your email signature, and adding your pronouns next to your display name on virtual platforms such as [Zoom](#). Sharing your pronouns also interrupts the normalization of making assumptions. **Share your pronouns only if you feel comfortable and safe doing so.**
 - In a group meeting you can encourage people to introduce themselves with their name and pronouns, *if they would like to*. In this instance, if someone does not introduce themselves with pronouns, it is important to move on and not make note of it.
- **Ask:** If you do not know someone's pronouns, ask, "Do you feel comfortable sharing your pronouns?" It's preferable to ask this question one-on-one, rather than in a large group. Some people do not feel comfortable sharing their pronouns, and they should not be forced to do so. If you don't know someone's pronouns, use their name.
- **Respect:** If someone lets you know their name and pronouns, use them and respect them.
- **Practice:** If you struggle using someone's pronouns, practice and correct yourself.
- **Mistakes:** If you make a mistake and refer to someone with the incorrect pronouns, don't make a big deal out of your mistake or draw a lot of attention to it. Fix it, apologize privately, and make sure to get it right in the future.

For more information, check out these resources:

1. Talking About Pronouns in the Workplace, Human Rights Campaign. hrc.org/resources/talking-about-pronouns-in-the-workplace.
2. What are personal pronouns? Why do they matter?. mypronouns.org/what-and-why.
3. Resources, International Pronouns Day. pronounsday.org/resources.
4. Pronouns. grammarly.com/blog/pronouns/.