Asking For and Using Pronouns
Making Spaces More Gender Inclusive

The concept of gender is evolving, and therefore so are gender identities. Some people use non-traditional pronouns. Someone's name and pronouns may change after you have already been introduced to the person. Some people use more than one set of pronouns for themselves.

This guide can be used as a starting point to using pronouns respectfully. The guide provides some suggestions and information for in the general community as well as inside the classroom.

Why are pronouns important?

No matter your gender identity, gender can be very important to someone's sense of self. To incorrectly gender someone can cause the person to feel disrespected, alienated, or dysphoric (or a combination of the three).

It is very important to know that you cannot visually tell if someone's gender. This means that you can also not visually tell if someone is transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, gender-variant, etc.

Asking for pronouns can prevent emotional distress from happening, and sets an example of respect.

Do names and pronouns change?

To answer simply: yes! Knowing your gender identity is not always an easy process. For example, some people may change their pronouns and names based on their personal gender fluidity, and some people may just need to "try something out". Making space for this is important to be respectful.

People may change their pronouns without changing their name, appearance, or gender identity. Names may change without changing pronouns, appearance, or gender identity. In short, it is not possible to know without asking. One way to make space for this might be to have regular check-ins with a person.

How do I know what pronouns to use?

Asking for pronouns can depend in the setting. When speaking to a student, classmate, co-worker, or other community member to whom you introduce yourself, it is best to ask for their pronouns. Some ways to do this might be –

- "What pronouns do you use?"
- "What pronouns should I use for you in this space?"*
- "My name is Dan, and my pronouns are he and him. What about you?"

If you aren't sure of someone's name or pronouns but you have already asked or met the person, it is okay to ask for them again or later.

For the classroom, club/organization, or any other group that meets regularly, there are several ways to make space for pronouns.

- Have everyone introduce themselves; make a point to have people say their preferred names and pronouns for the space. This gives space for everyone to learn the pronunciation of each other's names as well as learning pronouns.
- Ask everyone to email or write down their preferred names and pronouns.

Calling roll from a sheet without knowledge of how someone wants to identify themself in the classroom can be very harmful; this can out the student and often does not give much flexibility to ask for pronouns. If you as a student are worried this might happen, it is reasonable to email a group leader or professor beforehand, but should not be necessary.

*Asking what pronouns to use in a specific space makes room for people to express themselves in a variety of ways, including if the person does not want to out themselves in certain spaces. People may not be out everywhere and don't want to be.

What do I do when someone uses pronouns that I don't know?

As mentioned, gender and our understandings of it change. Many transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people create their own pronouns or use pronouns that are not widely used. Many people will appreciate if you ask for clarification respectfully. For example –

> *"I'm sorry, did you say "ze/hir" pronouns? How do I use those?"*

Not everyone likes to be asked to clarify, and sometimes asking for clarification can draw too much attention. If you are in a large group, for example, you may instead can try to self-educate or ask the person in private.

What should I do when I make a mistake?

Most people appreciate an apology and correction. Try not to draw more attention to your mistake. For example -

> *"She likes – I'm sorry, ze likes Collier more than Canaday."*

Correcting yourself shows that you respect the person and their identity.

Do not address people by pronouns or names that they do not use, even if the person used the names or pronouns in the past.

If you realize or are told later that you made mistake, a brief apology can help. For example –

> *"I'm sorry I used the wrong name and pronoun for you. I'll be more careful in the future."*

Making excuses can be frustrating or triggering for the person. Most people prefer only an apology and reassurance that you will try better.

It can be tough to remember pronouns, especially if you are learning new ones. The best solution is to practice when possible. Some places to practice online are included at the end of this document.

When should I correct others' mistakes?

Some people may not want a lot of attention drawn to them. Some people may not want someone else standing up for them. Others may appreciate you standing up for them. You can ask if the person would want you to correct others.

One way to ask might be –

> *"I heard our professor use the wrong pronoun for you in class. Should I correct her or others in the future?"*

If the wrong pronoun is used for a person who isn't present, try a brief correction. Remember, you may not know the correct pronoun or want to out the person. For example:

> *"I think Skylar uses 'they/them' pronouns. Am I wrong?"*

Respecting Boundaries

While it is important to take an active role – where it is through educating yourself, checking in if a person's name or pronouns have changed, or correcting yourself and others who make mistakes – it is also important to do this at the comfort level of the trans person with whom you are interacting. Do not ask about a person's body, their potential former names, their gender, why or how they know they are a certain gender, their sexual practices, or any other questions that are invasive unless the person invites you to ask.

Practicing Pronouns

There are many ways of practicing pronouns. Practicing pronouns can be very helpful if you are trying to associate a person with their pronoun or if you're trying to learn new pronouns. In the "Pronoun Examples" section, there are some example sentences that you can practice. Also, there are a variety of internet resources that allow for practice. Here are a few:

- http://www.practicewithpronouns.com/
- http://www.pronouns.failedslacker.com/
- http://minus18.org.au/pronouns-app/

Pronoun Examples

This is by no means a complete list of pronouns. However, this can provide some basic knowledge. Many of these pronouns also have several different forms, a few of which are detailed below.

	NOMINATIVE (SUBJECT)	OBJECTIVE (OBJECT)	POSSESSIVE DETERMINER	POSSESSIVE PRONOUN	REFLEXIVE
SHE	*She* knows	I ask *her*	*Her* lantern glows	That is *hers*	She likes *herself*
HE	*He* knows	I ask *him*	*His* lantern glows	That is *his*	He likes *himself*
THEY (OR EY)	*They* know	I ask *them*	*Their* lantern glows	That is *theirs*	They like *themself*
IT	*It* knows	I ask *it*	*Its* lantern glows	That is *its*	It likes *itself*
ZE (OR ZIE)*	*Ze* knows	I ask *zir*	*Zir* lantern glows	That is *zirs*	Ze likes *zirself*
SIE	*Sie* knows	I ask *sym*	*Syr* lantern glows	That is s*yrs*	Ne likes *syrself*
CO	*Co* knows	I ask *cos*	*Cos* lantern glows	That is *cos*	Co likes *coself*
XE (OR XIE)*	*Xe* knows	I ask *xym*	*Xyr* lantern glows	That is *xyrs*	Xe likes *xyrself*
VE	*Ve* knows	I ask *ver*	*Vis* lantern glows	That is *vers*	Ve likes *verself*
KIT	*Kit* knows	I ask *kit*	*Kits* lantern glows	That is *kits*	Kit likes *kitself*

*These pronouns have several forms. For example, *ze* may be formatted in a variety of ways, such as *ze/zir, ze/zyr, or ze/hir*. *Ze* has alternative spellings such as *zie* or *zhe*. Similarly, *xe* may be formatted *xe/xyr, xe/xim, xe/xir, xe/xem*, and *xe* has alternative spellings such as *xy* or *xie*.

There are internet sources that also provide other pronoun examples. One of the most comprehensive pronoun guides available can be found here: http://askanonbinary.tumblr.com/pronouns