WHY PRONOUNS MATTER TO US ALL

IPG

Diversity & Inclusion

00 INTRODUCTION

Aside from being a relatively hot topic in the US these days, many people probably haven't thought about pronouns since they first learned about them, likely in first or second grade. **Unfortunately, what many of us did not learn during that early lesson was that, using pronouns often relies on making assumptions**.

Pronouns are often used as a shortcut, for example, in the English language pronouns are used in order not to have to use a person's name over and over again in the same sentence. In English, pronouns are gendered, so unless you ask first, replacing a person's name with a pronoun leads to making assumptions about that person's gender identity.

As COVID-19 continues to alter the course of how we work, keeping most of us in our homes and communicating digitally, **it's vital to remember that how we address each other matters.** In the absence of in-person contact, correct pronoun usage is essential to respect the identities of our colleagues and ensure everyone feels seen and valued.

What's in this guide?

The following guide offers insight into why pronouns are valuable to all of us, not only transgender* and nonbinary* folks. **This guide provides answers to common questions around what pronouns mean and how to start incorporating them into everyday language and actions.** We dive into the usage of the singular "they" pronouns to provide clarity around why it's used and how respecting pronouns affirms people's gender and has a profound impact on their well-being.
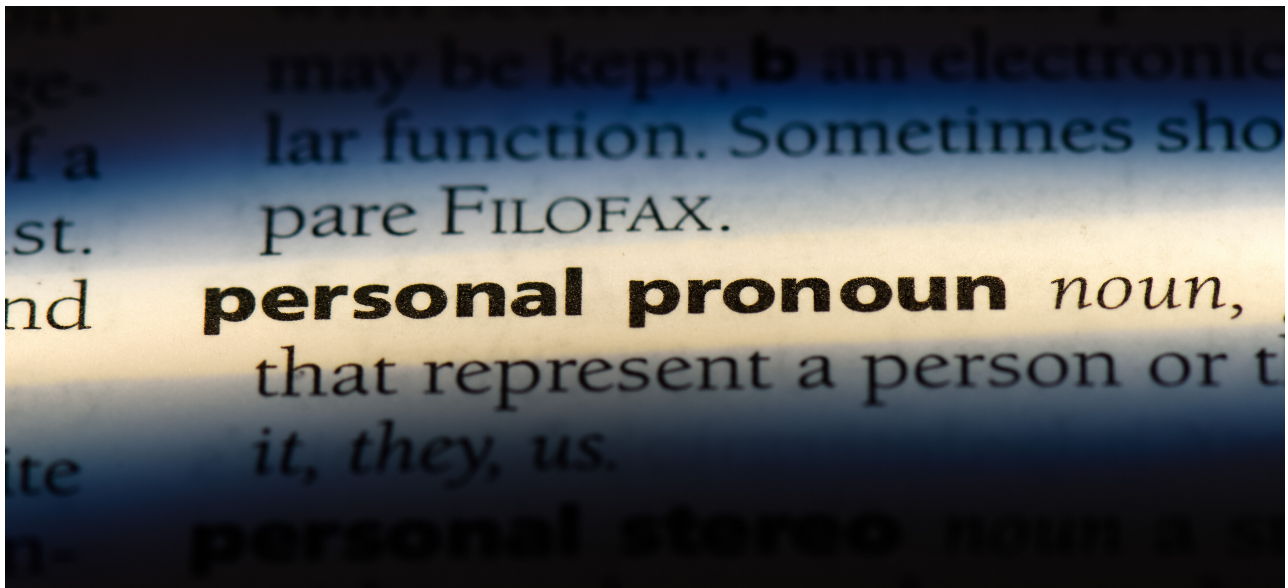
The problem with making assumptions about gender is that it is harmful for everyone. Much of the time, assumptions are incorrect (we all know what happens when we assume...). Moreover, even when correct, **gender assumptions rely heavily on stereotypes and the idea that people must look or sound a certain way to be a certain gender**.

This is problematic for every human being, cisgender*, transgender* and nonbinary* alike, regardless of how you identify. Cisgender (or cis for short) is a term used to describe a person whose gender aligns with what they were assigned at birth. Cisgender people often do not live up to every stereotype of their gender and are therefore harmed by categorization that limits expression and variation.

Transgender and nonbinary folks have added layers of harm, they can experience emotional discomfort and even risk of violence and danger when their identity and presentation doesn't align with assumptions society ascribes to gender. Respecting personal pronouns is about safety and creating safe environments for everyone to feel empowered to be who they are.

Using someone's pronouns correctly is also one of the most basic and yet profound ways to show our respect for gender identity. This simple act might seem like something minor, but it can have a tremendous impact and allows us to lead with our allyship and educate new potential allies about gender identity, expression, and diversity.

02 THE 'SINGULAR' THEY

In 2019, the Merriam-Webster English Dictionary declared the singular and nonbinary pronoun, '**they**', as the word of the year. This was due to a rise in internet searches, as well as a surge of individuals in blogs and social media declaring the usage of the singular they pronoun. As Merriam-Webster writes, the usage of they in reference to a nonbinary person, "is increasingly common in published, edited text, as well as social media and in daily personal interactions between English speakers. There's no doubt that its use is established in the English language, which is why it was added to the Merriam-Webster.com dictionary."

As with many languages, the English language is fluid, it changes and adapts to how it's used our day-to-day world, and the singular they is no exception. In this way, some people wonder why not just create an entirely new singular neutral pronoun, and the answer is: we did that too. There are many new pronouns used in English, as well as other languages, that refer to a singular neutral or nonbinary person. For example, some people in the LGBTQ+ community use the pronoun "ze, hir, hirs" (pronounced zee, hear, hears). Sometimes these new pronouns are challenging to introduce into colloquial vernacular, however, what's more important is to respect the pronouns someone asks for.

03 THE 'SINGULAR' THEY

While it can feel awkward at first when starting to incorporate the singular they into daily usage, the truth is, people actually use it all the time in English, often without realizing it. For example, "Someone left their phone at the bar. I should get it back to them somehow, I'm sure they are looking for it." When we don't know the gender of someone we're talking about, it's very common to substitute they instead of using he or she. And when you aren't sure of someone's gender you're talking about and you're unable to ask, simply using their name is generally a safe bet. For the most part, as with anything new, it just takes practice to become more familiar and comfortable.

04 TAKING ACTION

There are many easy ways to start incorporating pronouns into everyday usage. As our world shifts heavily towards virtual engagements, here are some suggestions to keep in mind that respect everyone's individual identities and make space to familiarize pronoun usage.

→ Try adding your pronouns to your email signature and digital profiles wherever possible. It signals allyship to others and helps normalize the process.

→ Practice sharing your pronouns out loud with a friend. It's always a good idea to make space for others to share their pronouns, you never know when someone's made the decision to change them.

→ Start meetings by sharing pronouns, even when you all know each other. This helps set the standard and builds good practice.

→ Share pronouns when introducing new members of the team - but always be sure to ask first!

→ Try not to make assumptions. We all make mistakes, and if you do, simply correct yourself and move on.

The more we practice and make space for pronouns to be normalized, the easier it gets. By using a person's correct pronouns, we not only respect their identity but also create an environment that's more inclusive. It may take time to build it into your everyday language, but it starts with being aware. As we familiarize ourselves with why it matters to share pronouns, we create safe spaces for everyone.

For more information on pronouns and how to use them, check out these other great resources:

[Why I Put Pronouns in my Email Signature](#)
[How to use pronouns](#)
[Making Mistakes](#)
[Pronouns - what and why](#)
[Why you should ask for someone's pronouns - instead of assuming](#)

*Defined:

Cisgender (or cis for short) is a term used to describe a person whose gender aligns with what they were assigned at birth.

Transgender (or trans for short) is a term used for someone whose gender identity does not align with what they were assigned at birth. Some trans people undergo gender-confirming medical transitions, others do not.

Nonbinary is a term people use who identify outside binary genders male/masculine and female/feminine, and instead identify as both, neither, or a combination. Other terms used by people identifying outside the binary are gender non-conforming (GNC), gender-fluid and genderqueer.

QUESTIONS?

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