



Pronouns and gender inclusive language

Best practice guidelines supplement

Note: This is an English-speaking person's guide to pronouns. Other languages approach pronouns, gender, and grammar in different ways.

Definitions

Pronouns are words that can function as a noun phrase (i.e. to replace a name) to refer to someone or something. They are used instead of a noun to make communication more concise and less repetitive.

People use a range of pronouns, such as they/them, she/her, he/him, xe/xem, ze/zir, and so on.

Conjugating pronouns

'Conjugation' is the process of adapting a word for different contexts and tenses, depending on the sentence. For example 'broken', 'breaking', and 'broke' and all conjugations of the present simple verb 'to break'.

All pronouns are conjugated consistently in English. As long as you can fill in all the different conjugated forms for one pronoun, you can learn any pronoun you haven't used before by following the same patterns and conjugations.

For example, the pronoun 'she' has the conjugations 'she', 'her', 'hers', and 'herself' that are used in different contexts and sentences.

Pronouns and gender

Some pronouns are '**gendered**' in that they imply the gender of the person (she/her and he/him) while others are gender neutral. However, some people who use she/her pronouns do not identify as women and some people who use he/him do not identify as men. You should not assume a person's gender based solely on the pronouns a person uses.



A person's pronouns are determined by that person, not by anybody else. It is impolite and incorrect to refer to somebody using pronouns other than their own. This includes using gender neutral pronouns that are different from the gender neutral pronouns a person has stated they use. Gender neutral pronouns are not interchangeable.

Some people use more than one pronoun. They might be happy to have people choose between a couple of options (which can be denoted as she/they or she/he/they etc.) or they might be gender fluid and alternate between pronouns based on a range of factors. Some people are happy for any pronouns to be used for them. Often gender fluid people have systems for easily communicating their pronouns, and the easiest way to address this is to communicate.

Some people don't use pronouns at all and prefer to just always use their name instead.

Singular 'they'

They/them can be used as a **singular pronoun**. For example 'They went to the grocery store' or 'I went with them'.

Neopronouns

Although they/them is a commonly used gender neutral pronoun, there are many others that are used. These gender neutral options are referred to as '**neopronouns**'.

Unknown or undetermined

If you are using pronouns to refer to someone whose pronouns or gender you don't know, or you are describing a hypothetical situation where the person referred to could be any gender using any pronouns, there are a few options.

Singular 'they' is the most common solution. It is conjugated just like the third person plural pronoun 'they', with the one exception being that the reflexive pronoun is 'themselves' rather than 'themselves'.

The pronoun 'one' is another gender-neutral, third-person singular pronoun, usually used to refer to a person. Its conjugation is fixed, so it's just used as 'one' whether it's a subject or an object. The possessive form is 'one's', and the reflexive form is 'oneself'.

Another route would be to use the relative pronoun 'who'. Relative pronouns connect adjective clauses to the main clause of a sentence. It can be used in subject form as 'who', object form as 'who' or 'whom', and



possessive as 'whose'. This may take some rearranging of the sentence compared to the other pronouns above.

Examples:

- If someone doesn't receive an update within two weeks, they can assume an unfavorable verdict.
- If there's no update within two weeks, one can assume an unfavorable verdict.
- Anyone who doesn't get an update within two weeks can assume an unfavorable verdict.

Gender-inclusive language

Titles and honorifics

Honorifics are used commonly to indicate formality, respect, or authority. Usage varies across different cultures and locales. Many honorifics fall along the gender binary, though some gender-neutral alternatives have been offered (with more likely to come in the future).

As a general rule, ask people what honorifics they prefer to use.

These common titles are used frequently in letters and more formal occasions.

- Mx. is a gender-neutral honorific.
- M. is gender-neutral honorific.
- Mr. can be used to refer to any man, regardless of marital status, if he does not have another professional or academic title he prefers.
- Ms. should be used to refer to women as a default, since it can be used regardless of marital status.
- Mrs. should be used only for married women who prefer to use it. Some women decide not to use this title if they feel they don't want to be marked for their marital status, if they did not take their husband's last name, or for any other reasons.
- Miss may be used for young girls or unmarried women who prefer to use it.
- There are many other gender-neutral honorifics that nonbinary people may prefer to use. The best way to be sure what honorific to use is to ask.

Remember some people have alternative professional honorifics like Dr. or Prof. Use these where appropriate. Avoid assuming the gender of a person who uses one of these honorifics, and ensure any systems you create do not automatically categorise these honorifics as associated with a particular gender.

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Sir / madam or ma'am

These titles are used sometimes in formal settings to acknowledge rank or authority or to connote a general respect or flattery. In some cultures, like the American South, these are used commonly by workers performing a service.

Sir and ma'am are often made compulsory by societal norms, employers, or hierarchical authority. However, because those structures are built around the social construct of binary gender, it shuts out nonbinary people. There is no widely known gender-neutral alternative to these titles.

Be cognisant of this if using sir or ma'am; consider other possible ways to achieve your goal, whether it's acknowledging rank, authority, or politeness.

Ladies and gentlemen

In formal settings, this is a typical way to address a room full of people with mixed genders. Dividing along binary gender lines is not inclusive of folks outside the gender binary. A non-gendered alternative is 'distinguished guests' for formal events.

For less formal occasions, many queer community spaces and event organisers have come up with myriad creative ways to be gender-inclusive. Some fun examples include, 'guys, gals, and nonbinary pals', 'ladies, gentlemen, friends within and beyond the binary', and 'theydies and gentlethems'.

Alternative, non-formal modes of address include 'folks', 'friends', 'wonderful humans', etc.

Man as 'default'

There are many examples in writing where 'man' is used as a default to refer to an undetermined person or to refer to all people in general. This standard upholds a patriarchal understanding of who is seen as whole and human (in written English, often white men) and who is seen as subhuman or property (everyone else). To counteract this, one must be intentional about catching and actively reframing the way we talk and write about people when we do so in a general sense. This man-as-default shows up in myriad ways in the English language; the following list is by no means exhaustive.

Mankind

Although the etymology of this word isn't rooted in gender, modern day readers often feel that it falls into man-as-default. An easy alternative is 'humankind'.



All men

When actually referring to all male persons, this is fine. However, as it is used in 'All men are created equal', it refers to all people. So 'all people' can be used as an alternative. Avoid 'all men and women', as it reinforces the gender binary.

The same applies to 'no man', which is used in phrases such as 'no man's land' or 'no man shall strike me down'. Unless used to refer only to male persons, use instead 'no person' or 'no one'.

'Guys' and 'you guys'

Again, if this is used to refer to a group of all male persons, this is fine. However, this phrase is often used to refer to mixed gender groups, as long as at least one member is male. In some cases it is used to refer to groups entirely made up of non-men as well. While some people who aren't men don't mind being referred to in this way, this usage does fall into the pattern of man-as-default. It's good practice to check in with a group of people if they feel uncomfortable being addressed in this way or to avoid using 'guys' altogether. Gender-neutral alternatives include y'all, friends, everyone, or folks.

Gender-based expressions and idioms

Certain cultural expressions rely on gender stereotypes and expectations to make their point. For example, 'man up', 'don't be a pussy', 'grow a pair', and 'you fight like a girl' all reinforce the idea that strength and courage are inherent in men and boys while absent in people who are not men. There are many instances of gender stereotypes popping up in various cultural expressions, often around strength, valor, and stoicism as masculine and fragility, beauty, and emotional sensitivity as feminine. Avoid using these expressions and find non-gendered comparisons for metaphors. For example, 'you fight like a wet sock'.

Jobs, roles, and positions

There are a number of words used for occupations, roles, and positions that have historically been filled exclusively or primarily by men because of gender-based social limitations or expectations. The resulting manifestations in the English language have lasted, even as many occupations have opened their doors to all genders.

Suffix '-man'

Many jobs, roles, and positions contain this gendered suffix, like policeman, mailman, chairman, spokesman, fireman etc. There has been a convention to replace that with -woman, like policewoman, chairwoman, spokeswoman, etc. This creates two problems: it reinforces the gender binary, and it distinguishes the gender of the person in the role.



This often ushers in overt discrimination towards women, who bear the brunt of the burden for the public's expectations misaligning with their existence in a role. A gender-inclusive solution is to use the suffix -person or a gender neutral word in its place, like police officer, mail delivery person, chairperson, spokesperson, firefighter.

Some job titles are divided down gender lines, such as waiter/waitress, actor/actress, usher/usherette, etc. This presents the same problem as stated above; it's not inclusive of nonbinary people, and it pits societal expectations of gender roles against the people occupying those roles.

For some titles, there is a gender-neutral alternative, like 'server' instead of waiter/waitress, and in other cases there may be a preference to use a single version of the title, like 'actor' for all genders.

For other jobs or roles, a title may be gendered, but alternatives have never been created, so the same title is used universally regardless of gender. For example, midwife has the gendered suffix -wife, but it is used for people of all genders.

When creating characters with job titles, explore the standards of the time and whenever possible ask for the experience and opinions of people working in that role who are of a gender that does not have dominance and power in the field, including nonbinary people. When creating titles that are fictional, be cognisant of and intentional when / if limiting titles by gender.

Societal expectations

Beyond job titles themselves, there is sometimes an inclination to add a gender modifier to an occupation based on the gender roles and expectations of that occupation. For example, specifying that someone is a 'male nurse' or a 'women's soccer player' or a 'girl gamer'. This reinforces the othering of the people in these roles that do not align with societal gender roles; it can also feel diminishing to their personhood or value in that role, since it shifts the focus and interest to their gender and the misalignment with expectation.

Be cognisant when calling out the gender of a person when describing their occupation or role: **is referencing gender relevant to the message?**

Consider if you would mention other genders for the same title. Be consistent if so, and be intentional about using gender modifiers in a way that doesn't reinforce harmful gender norms.



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Intentional gendering by marginalised people

Sometimes, people who are marginalised because of their gender may intentionally add a gendered modifier or suffix to a title or description as an expression of creativity, empowerment, reclamation, or personal gender expression.

For example, a trans woman who works as a web developer might ask to have the title of 'webmistress', a feminine gendering of webmaster, if it's something that feels fun or affirming to her. Sex workers also often create their own titles by intentionally gendering certain words or descriptors. A group of women working in a male-dominated field might use an intentionally gendered descriptor in an act of reclamation to show solidarity with each other.

Because these are intentional decisions by the people directly impacted by gender marginalisation, this playfulness with gendered language does not carry the same oppressive weight of gender modifiers imposed on people based on societal expectations around gender roles. Just because someone is using terminology to refer to themselves does not mean that it is appropriate for somebody else to use that terminology—especially towards someone who does not want it.

As a general rule, individuals can choose to use gendered language to refer to themselves but should avoid it when referring to others unless otherwise stated. It is also important to avoid gatekeeping who can use which terms to refer to themselves, as this creates divides and ostracisation.

Normalising pronouns

Normalising the inclusion of pronouns in introductions, on name badges, in email signatures, on social media biographies, and so on helps support people with marginalised genders. It reduces the unfair burden of disclosing and correcting pronouns that typically falls on people whose gender presentation breaks entrenched social norms (i.e. a person who wears feminine clothes and uses he/him pronouns, a person with a beard who uses they/them pronouns, etc).

If you are working on something that involves name badges, include pronoun stickers, a field for these to be written on a name badge, or some other way for all attendees to indicate their pronouns. If this is pursued, it's important that all attendees indicate their pronouns, to normalise it. If pronouns are included in the application process, you could have them printed on people's badges along with their name. Include guidance and moderation so that people do not use this as an opportunity to be offensive—either through ignorance or malicious intent.

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Please also note that not everybody is 'out' in every context or is comfortable being 'out' at a public event. This means some people may struggle to fill in a 'pronouns' field because they are unable to do so accurately and safely. There is no perfect solution to this, so prioritise creating a safe environment, open lines of communication, and options for people to self-identify wherever possible.

Pitfalls to avoid

Assumptions

Always take the small extra step to check what pronouns someone uses; don't make assumptions based on their presentation, name, or gender. It is important to do this equally for everybody, rather than singling out people who appear androgynous or whose gender presentation is non-normative.

The best, most respectful way to check pronouns is to offer your own pronouns first. For example, 'My name is Jane and my pronouns are they/them. Nice to meet you!'

Avoid using the phrasing 'preferred pronouns', since it implies that those pronouns are optional and a matter of taste.

Binary ambiguation

Some may have seen or learned the standard of using 'he or she' as the gender-neutral alternative to a third person pronoun when the antecedent is unknown or undetermined. This may also be written as 'he/she' or 's/he' with similar formatting for other conjugations, like 'his or hers'. This reinforces the gender binary and is not gender-inclusive.

Use 'they' or 'theirs' as a concise, inclusive alternative.

Inconsistency in address

Use a consistent format when addressing people of different genders, whatever titles are being used. For example, 'Professor John Bastion and Tracy will be presenting today' is diminutive of the latter, since the first colleague is addressed with his title and full name, while the second colleague is addressed with just her first name.

Inadvertently 'othering' trans people

In circumstances where the inclusion of trans people is wanting to be stated explicitly, be careful not to be othering in the way this is phrased. Using appositives is one way to keep everything on a level field.



Examples:

- This application is open to all women, including transgender and cisgender women.
- We want to uplift people who have faced marginalisation because of gender, like transgender people, intersex people, and cisgender women.
- Because we'll be discussing topics related to the experience of masculinity, any cisgender or transgender men are encouraged to attend.
- Our group is comprised entirely of non-male participants, featuring trans women, trans nonbinary people, and cisgender women.

Avoid phrases like 'women and trans women', as this phrase carries the implication that trans women are not included as women.

Also avoid making the distinction between trans women 'identifying as women' when cis women 'are women'. Be consistent and thoughtful in the way that you delineate what inclusion means.

Resources

The Allusionist: No Title

<https://www.theallusionist.org/allusionist/notitle>

Honorifics and what to do when somebody prefers not to use them.

Education First: Pronouns

<https://www.ef.edu/english-resources/english-grammar/pronouns/>

Information about how pronoun conjugation works.

The Free Dictionary: Relative Pronouns

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Relative-Pronouns.htm>

Relative pronouns, what they are, and how they are used.

Merriam-Webster: Singular 'They'

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they>

Information about singular 'they', its historical use, the precedent for contemporary use.