

NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

PRONOUN GUIDE

This is a guide for NEA leaders, members and staff to better understand and use pronouns in a respectful way for all NEA meetings and communications. Please be aware that some of this advice may not be appropriate for your school community, depending on current state law; check with your state or local affiliate regarding questions related to state law or school district policies.

PRONOUNS

Pronouns are words that function in the place of a name. Instead of saying, “My brother Steve is coming to pick me up in Steve’s car, and we are going to Steve’s favorite restaurant,” a person could instead say, “his car/his favorite restaurant.”

In English, we have two sets of gendered pronouns: “she/her/hers” and “he/him/his” are pronouns that are attached to a particular gender. Men/males have typically been referred to using he/him/his and women/females by using she/her/hers. We likely all grew up assuming we knew someone’s pronouns just by looking at them, or knowing their gender, but that isn’t the case. In an effort to be more affirming of all, it is important to get out of the habit of assuming pronouns.

Plural pronouns are becoming more widely accepted as gender-neutral singular pronouns. It is grammatically correct to use singular ‘they’ to refer a singular person of unknown gender or to a non-binary person who does not feel gendered pronouns work for them.

Here is a list of the most common pronouns used. Always use the pronouns of the individual once they have told you what pronouns they use. You may see more pronouns outside of this list.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronouns	Reflexive	Pronunciation
She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself	
He	Him	His	His	Himself	
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves	
Ze	Zim	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	Zay or Zee Zim (rhymes with them) Zir (rhymes with their)

TIPS ON USING GENDER-NEUTRAL PRONOUNS

Chances are that you’ve used ‘they, them, or their’ as neutral pronouns when you weren’t aware of a person’s gender. These pronouns are gender-neutral and are used by some transgender and gender non-conforming people. Recognizing that it’s natural to do this can help when a nonbinary person asks you to use gender-neutral pronouns for them. The following are examples when you might have used gender-neutral pronouns without realizing:

- ▶ You’re at an event, and someone left a key for you, but you can’t find it. You might ask, “Where did they leave the key?”
- ▶ You are awaiting a delivery from a postal worker and wonder, “When are they dropping off the mail?”
- ▶ Someone gives your organization a gift, but you didn’t meet the donor. You might say, “Please tell them I said thank you!”

SHARE YOUR PRONOUNS

If we want to get out of the habit of assuming pronouns, we need to learn and let people introduce their pronouns.

Role model your pronouns before inviting everyone to introduce theirs.

"Hi, my name is Meg and I use she/her/hers pronouns. Could everyone please go around and share their name and pronouns."

Explain what pronouns are and why you're asking people to introduce theirs before you do.

"Hey everyone! So during introductions we are going to introduce our name and pronouns. Pronouns are words that we use to replace names, like she/her/hers, he/him/his, or they/them/theirs. I want to make sure that we are referring to each other in the way that feels most accurate, so we are going to be going around and if everyone could share their name and pronouns that'd be great!"

A common question and fear that we may have when getting to know someone who has recently changed pronouns or who uses singular they as their pronoun, is that we will make a mistake and misgender the person.

Apologize briefly and correct yourself. For example, *"And I was saying to someone that he's a really good – sorry, she – that she was a really good painter."*

Do not over apologize. Over apologizing could sound like, *"Oh gosh I am SO SO sorry, I really am. I know it's wrong and this must happen all the time. Gosh pronouns are so difficult!"* You're doing a few things when you over apologize. Instead of the moment being about them, you've made it about your feelings.



IT'S ABOUT RESPECT

Positive experiences of social gender affirmation are critical to the health and well-being of transgender and gender diverse people. Social interactions where a person is addressed by their correct name and pronouns, consistent with their gender identity, are widely recognized as a basic – yet critical – aspect of gender affirmation. Addressing someone by the wrong name or misgendering them through the use of incorrect pronouns can feel disrespectful, harmful, and even unsafe to the person being misgendered. Misgendering results in marginalization and communicates that a person's identity is not being seen or respected. So, practice using the pronouns a transgender or nonbinary person requests... yes, even plural 'they'. It's a show of respect.

PRONOUN USE IN POLICY

Over the last few years, the transgender community has asked allies to help normalize offering pronouns during introductions, in education, and the workplace to indicate an understanding of trans identities and show that they are a safe person. As gender identity and gender expression do not always align, offering pronouns is a way to create a space where people do not need to rely on assumptions of others' gender.

However, not everyone is comfortable sharing their pronouns. Some transgender, nonbinary, or questioning individuals might not be "out" yet or ready to let others know of their trans status. Others might object to sharing for any number of personal reasons. Respect those who offer to share their pronouns and those who do not. No one should be forced to comply, as long as they simply skip the practice and do not mock or belittle it.

Offering your pronouns is the simplest way to put things into practice. When you meet someone new, you can say, "Hi, my name is ____ and my pronouns are ____." If you wear a nametag or ID badge, you can add your pronouns to it. If you cannot alter your official nametag, it is easy to find pronoun pins in stores and online. When you participate in an online meeting, you can change your name to include your pronouns in parentheses to the side.

For more information on pronouns and additional LGBTQ+ Resources, please visit the following:

[NEA LGBTQ+ Resources](#) | [NEA EdJustice](#) | [Why Share Your Pronouns?](#)