

First Names and Pronouns

The concept of gender is evolving, and therefore so are gender identities. Some people use nontraditional 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.

When might an individual wish to use a different or new first name?

An individual may wish to use a first name (other than their legal name) and pronoun for many reasons. There are times when a nickname or middle name may be used as a first name rather than a legal first name. There are also occasions in which an individual may wish to use a first name due to gender identity or gender expression.

Why are pronouns important?

No matter your identity, gender can be very important to someone's sense of self. Pronouns are often a representation of an individual's gender identity or wish to express a neutral gender identity. 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.

What are gender-neutral pronouns, and why might someone wish to use them?

Gender-neutral pronouns are pronouns that do not associate a gender with an individual. Some languages, such as English, have no truly gender-neutral third person pronoun available or commonly used, thus gender-neutral pronouns are created in the interest of greater gender equity. In addition to being able to use them to refer to an individual whose gender is unknown at the moment of conversation, gender-neutral pronouns can be an option for an individual within the transgender, genderqueer, and gender-neutral communities.

What are some examples of gender-neutral pronouns?

The most commonly used gender-neutral pronouns are listed below, along with their pronunciations and the gendered pronouns 'he' and 'she' for easy reference. Members of the KCAI community most often identify as he, she, or they.

	NOMINATIVE (SUBJECT)	OBJECTIVE (OBJECT)	POSSESSIVE DETERMINER	POSSESSIVE PRONOUN	REFLEXIVE
SHE	<i>She</i> knows	I ask <i>her</i>	<i>Her</i> project	That is <i>hers</i>	<i>Herself</i>
HE	<i>He</i> knows	I ask <i>him</i>	<i>His</i> project	That is <i>his</i>	<i>Himself</i>
THEY (OR EY)	<i>They</i> know	I ask <i>them</i>	<i>Their</i> project	That is <i>theirs</i>	<i>Themselves</i>
ZE (OR ZIE)*	<i>Ze</i> knows	I ask <i>zir</i>	<i>Zir</i> project	That is <i>zirs</i>	<i>Ze</i>
SIE	<i>Sie</i> knows	I ask <i>sym</i>	<i>Syr</i> project	That is <i>syr</i>	<i>Syrself</i>
CO	<i>Co</i> knows	I ask <i>cos</i>	<i>Cos</i> project	That is <i>cos</i>	<i>Co</i>
XE (OR XIE)*	<i>Xe</i> knows	I ask <i>xym</i>	<i>Xyr</i> project	That is <i>xyrs</i>	<i>Xe</i>
VE (OR VIE)*	<i>Ve</i> knows	I ask <i>ver</i>	<i>Vis</i> project	That is <i>vers</i>	<i>Verself</i>
KIT	<i>Kit</i> knows	I ask <i>kit</i>	<i>Kits</i> project	That is <i>kits</i>	<i>Kitself</i>

**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.*

Isn't 'it' gender-neutral?

"It" is, but "it" is used to denote objects, and thus may be considered offensive in reference to an individual. Some transgender and gender non-conforming individuals report "it" being used in reference to them in demeaning, disgusted, and threatening ways.

Isn't this difficult to adjust to and doesn't this sound awkward?

Integrating a gender-neutral pronoun into an already existing language can prove difficult, but not impossible. It can be achieved through intentional practice, and can really help someone feel included and respected. Also, knowledge about and usage of gender-neutral pronouns are often a good way to communicate allyship to transgender and gender variant individuals.

How do I know what pronouns to use?

Asking for pronouns can depend on the setting. When speaking to a student, classmate, coworker, or other community member to whom you introduce yourself, it is best to ask for their pronouns. If you are not 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. Some ways to do this might be:

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

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 chosen 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 chosen names and pronouns.

Calling roll from a sheet without knowledge of how someone wants to identify themselves 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.

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 pie more than cake."

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 a 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.

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.

*Parts of this terminology sheet is adapted from a document created by Eli R. Green (eli@transacademics.org) and Eric N. Peterson at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside © 2003-2004. Other parts are adapted from various sources including wiseGEEK, Aether Lumina, trans@MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Vanderbilt University, and the University of Missouri. New adaptations and terminologies have been pulled from <https://www.brynmawr.edu/>.