**University of Kent staff & student guidance on pronouns**

**What are pronouns?**

Pronouns are used in sentences where we refer to people without using their name, for example using she/her/hers. Gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns (e.g. they/them/theirs) are pronouns that do not associate the individual with male or female gender.

Gender is assigned to a person at birth along with sex, according to certain anatomical attributes. Sex does not predetermine a person’s gender, however, and this assignment may conflict with the person’s gender identity - their internal sense of their own gender and what feels right for them. A person might identify as male, female, non-binary (outside of male or female), genderless, or some other gender identity.

It’s important to remember that it’s not always possible to know someone’s gender identity solely based on appearance, so we should be careful not to make assumptions about a person’s pronouns from their appearance, voice, or characteristics.

**Why do pronouns matter?**

Referring to people by the pronouns they determine for themselves is respectful and preserves human dignity. When someone is referred to with a pronoun (e.g. he/she/they) that doesn’t align with their gender identity, they can be left feeling alienated. This particularly affects transgender and gender nonconforming people. Together, we can work to celebrate people’s multiple, intersecting identities and create an inclusive culture at the University of Kent.

Many gender-neutral pronouns are becoming increasingly common. This includes the use of the singular ‘they’ or ‘ze’. An extensive list of more English gender-neutral pronouns are available on the [non-binary wiki](https://nonbinary.miraheze.org/wiki/English_neutral_pronouns). While some may feel unfamiliar to you, they are all linguistically valid. The singular use of “they” was the Linguistic Society of America’s [word of the decade](https://www.dw.com/en/singular-they-crowned-word-of-the-decade-by-us-linguists/a-51884397#:~:text=The%20American%20Dialect%20Society%20has,a%20non-binary%20gender%20identity.) in 2020.

Normalising sharing pronouns is important so that not only trans, nonbinary and/or intersex people are expected to share their pronouns. If only people perceived to be members of these communities are asked to share their pronouns, this can mark them out as “other.” It is good practice for all of us to normalise sharing our pronouns, rather than expecting that people will assume them correctly (even if they do).

**What can we do?**

The guidance below is optional as we recognise that not everyone may feel comfortable sharing their pronouns for a range of different reasons. This can be true for staff regardless of gender identity. It should be noted also that some people ask to be referred to by name rather than with pronouns.

*In the digital environment:*

The University of Kent encourages all staff and students to put their pronouns in their email signature. This format would work well: “Pronouns: they/them/theirs [inserting your own pronouns] and linking to this page [create page!] which offers more information on pronouns. We also encourage all staff and students to put their pronouns on their Teams profile name and other communication platforms.

*In meeting introductions:*

In meetings, particularly when hosting or meeting others for the first time, you could state your pronouns when you introduce yourself. Not only will this encourage colleagues to do the same, but it will normalise the practice, which will help trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people feel more comfortable to do the same.

*How will this help?*

These simple steps will help people respectfully refer to one another and create the beginnings of a more inclusive culture for everyone. They will also help staff avoid mistakes and accidentally misgendering someone which can be experienced as hurtful and alienating. It is also a great way to demonstrate trans allyship.

**What about mistakes?**

Of course, we all make mistakes. If this happens, please quickly apologise when you realise, correct yourself and continue the conversation. Try not to draw additional attention to your mistake, or to the person you referred to incorrectly. The societal habit of assuming people’s pronouns may be difficult to unlearn at first but, with practice, it will get easier.

We encourage people to be active bystanders, gently reminding of another’s pronouns in their absence, rather than staying quiet. This is crucial in creating an environment of challenging small behaviours and creating an authentic culture of inclusion. If the person is present, consider whether they would appreciate this attention being drawn to them in this particular situation, and whether they would appreciate another person speaking for them.

**How should I ask about pronouns?**

There are many respectful ways to ask people what pronouns they use. Simply introducing yourself with your pronouns and asking theirs or asking (or clarifying) what pronouns they use. If an opportunity does not arise to find out what pronouns someone uses, you can use the non-gendered ‘they’ until you are sure. This might be particularly useful if the interaction is short or minimal.

If you use pronouns that some people may not automatically assume for you please ask people to use them. Those who care about you and want to address you appropriately and respectfully will get there.

Further information can be found on Stonewall’s [website](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/international-pronouns-day) and their [The Truth About Trans](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/truth-about-trans) page and the [My Pronouns](https://www.mypronouns.org/) and [International Pronouns Day](https://pronounsday.org/) websites.

If you'd like to learn more about pronouns and can't find what you need here, contact us at equalityanddiverisity@kent.ac.uk and let us know.