

Pronouns at Work

What are pronouns?

Pronouns – A word that refers to someone or something that is being talked about (like “she”, “them”, “this” and “it”).

Gender pronouns (e.g. “she/her”, “he/him” and “they/them”) are the way that we constantly refer to one another’s gender identity. We may assume a person’s gender based on their name, appearance, voice, and/or expression, and “assign” a pronoun, but this may not always be correct.

Why are pronouns important?

A person’s identity is very important to them. Being mis-identified (accidentally or on purpose) is uncomfortable for all parties and can be offensive (and can be a form of harassment).

For a university, with many Doctor and Professor titles, identifying pronouns is made more difficult. Uncommon, reversed or unisex names may also lead to mistakes being made.

For trans and non-binary people pronouns can be particularly important.

What if I do not know which pronoun to use?

Just ask, never assume! “They” can and should be used to refer to an individual who doesn't identify with gender-specific pronouns and can also be used to refer to an individual whose gender identity is not known.

Other gender-neutral language such as “colleagues”, “students”, “team members”, “participants”, etc. should also be used generically.

Is “they” not a plural pronoun?

It is a common misconception that this usage is new and ungrammatical; in fact, it has precedence dating back to the 1300s and is recognised by the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

What if I make a mistake?

Nobody will mind an honest mistake. Just apologise, correct yourself and try not to do it again.

What can I do to help?

Many colleagues have added their pronouns to their email signatures. This is a simple and visible way to show your awareness of the importance of using the correct pronouns and to show your support. It is something everybody can do.

You can do it too - a suggested format is in the Appendix: example email signature.

Use gender-neutral language and terms and help others to do so too.

Where can I find further guidance?

- Visit the University of Exeter [Style Guide](#).
- Visit the Human Rights Campaign [Website](#), where you can download their “[Talking About Pronouns in the Workplace](#)” guide.

Developed by:

The University of Exeter LGBTQ+ Staff Network

Appendix: example email signature

Name

Pronouns: she/her

Job Title

University of Exeter

Telephone number

exeter.ac.uk

Building name, Address line 1, Address line 2, City, County, Postcode



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