

A PRIMER ON PRONOUNS AND GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

BY MEREDITH VANDEHAAR

As TL mentioned in their article in the print edition of the March/April 2020 issue of Rochester Women Magazine, more reading must be done in order to understand pronouns and gender—a topic most of us did not grow up discussing, but merely doing. This is meant simply as a place to start that research or as a quick reference; it is not meant as a resource from the ultimate arbiter on gender-inclusive language.

SELECTION OF PRONOUNS

Pronouns and gender are a big deal to everyone, although few realize it. Don't believe me? Misgender someone's dog while you're out walking sometime and see how adamantly they correct you!

All joking aside, to select pronouns, we enter into a process that we have become well-trained and fast at—gendering. Language and culture train us to compile and examine features of the person we are referring to—name, gender expression in dress and mannerisms, facial and body features, and more. We recognize these components of gender and rapidly deduce the person's likely gender prior to selecting the proper pronoun—in my case, “she, her and hers.” My gender expression, mannerisms, voice and other features generally are within the normal distribution of what one would expect for someone who uses those pronouns.

But what happens when you meet a new person and you can't tell? There are generally two approaches:

1. Try your best to pick the proper pronoun and roll with it. When corrected, apologize briefly and make that change.
2. Introduce yourself with your pronouns or ask, “What pronouns do you use?”

There are inherent pros and cons to each of these approaches. The first puts us in a position to make mistakes and focus on the recovery. The second, if inconsistently applied, puts gender-diverse individuals in a position to be outed when not in a queer space. The best thing we can do is to normalize exchanging pronouns with everyone. This can be done in low-, moderate- or high-effort ways to varying effect:

- Low effort: Put your pronouns in your email signature, wear them on your lapel or ID badge at work, and put them in your title slides to presentations or on by-lines for articles you are writing.
- Moderate effort: Introduce yourself in a group with your pronouns. This can serve as an icebreaker.
- High effort: Consistently introduce yourself with your pronouns when you meet new people one-on-one. “Hello, my name is Meredith. My pronouns are she, her, hers.”

A FEW BEST PRACTICES FOR GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

- Avoid honorifics like “sir” and “ma'am.” These are generally unnecessarily formal terms, and many people even find them condescending.
- Wherever possible, replace “he or she” with “they” in template documents or when referencing a person of unknown gender. “He” and “she” are not the only pronoun options, and reading “they” in these types of documents flows much more smoothly. The Associated Press Stylebook 2017 addresses this very topic.
- Use gender neutral alternative language wherever possible—for example, “postal worker” instead of “mailman.”

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