SAFS Pronoun Guide

This is a select set of best practice suggestions for pronoun use in our department. While it is not an exhaustive guide to using pronouns, it still aims to make sure people are treated with respect and made to feel like they belong by acknowledging the spectrum of gender identities by which people identify.

The SAFS Pronoun Guide assumes some basic level of familiarity with pronoun usage and begins with practical guidance on using pronouns in common settings. There is an FAQ section at the end of this document that goes into more detail about pronoun basics. If you are wondering what pronouns are or how to use them, it may be helpful to begin there. You can also find an excellent guide to pronouns at MyPronouns.org.

This guide is a living document and will be updated as needed. Suggestions are welcome, and any text herein may be subject to change according to shifts in grammar and usage. Please email the chairs of the Equity and Inclusion Committee at safsincl@uw.edu to provide feedback or request a time to discuss the content in this guide.

Pronoun Use in Common Settings

In Groups/Meetings
Ask people to introduce themselves with their name and pronouns. Encourage people to share if they feel comfortable, but avoid pressuring people to share. It’s important for cisgender people to initiate pronoun sharing and model how to do it for others. This helps normalize sharing and asking for pronouns, and it takes the burden off of trans and gender nonconforming folks to do the work every time.

Example:
“Hello everyone, we’re gonna go around and introduce ourselves. If you can share your name, pronouns, and how long you’ve worked here, that would be great. I’ll go first. My name is Marisol, my pronouns are she/her, and I’ve been part of this lab for three years.”
“Hi, I’m Jasmine, I also use she/her pronouns, and I started here, like, two months ago.”

One-on-One
Introduce yourself with your name and pronouns. The other person will usually respond in kind, removing the need to ask. If the other person doesn’t share, you can ask them, “What pronouns do you use?” If this is someone you’ve spoken to before and you can’t remember, never learned, or are unsure about their pronouns, it’s okay to ask quickly and simply.

Example 1:
“Hi, my name is Anesu. My pronouns are she, her, and hers.”
“Hi Anesu, I’m Kodai. My pronouns are he, him, and his.”
“It’s nice to meet you, Kodai!”
Example 2:
“Hi, I’m Amelia. It’s nice to meet you.”
“Hi Amelia, my name’s Wuhib. I use he/him pronouns.”
“Oh, cool. I use they/them pronouns.”

Example 3 (mid-conversation):
“Oh, hey, what are your pronouns?”
“Oh, yeah, I go by they/them.”
“Cool, thanks. I use she/her pronouns.”

Example 4 (mid-conversation):
“By the way, my pronouns are he/him/his.”
“Cool, yeah, I use he/him, too.”
“Awesome, thanks.”

Places to Write Your Pronouns
Email signature
Website
Nametags
Business cards
Office signage
Author/speaker bios
After your name on Zoom (tutorial)

Alternatives to Gendered Language
Ladies and gentlemen: folks, friends, colleagues, students, guests, everyone, y’all
Yes sir, yes ma’am: yes please
Boyfriend/girlfriend: partner
He or she: they, that person, the individual
Policeman, fireman, postman, etc.: police officer, firefighter, postal worker, etc.
Chairman: chairperson, chair
Man hours: staffing, FTE
Man the booth/table/etc.: staff, run, operate, work the X
Freshman: first-year student, first-year
Upperclassman: upper-level student

Things to Avoid
Asking personal questions about someone’s body
Categorizing/grouping people by gender
Inferring gender from appearance
Inferring gender from name or pronoun
Using gendered language
Pronoun FAQs

What are pronouns for?
Pronouns are for referring to someone without repeating the person’s name every time. This simplifies spoken and written language. In this guide, we only discuss third-person singular pronouns for people. First- and second-person pronouns (I/we and you) aren’t gendered in English, so there’s no risk of misgendering someone with them.

What pronouns are there?
The most commonly used third-person pronouns in English are he/him/his, she/her/hers, and they/them/their. “He” is commonly considered “male” and “she” is commonly considered “female”, although it is important to recognize that not everyone who goes by “he” is a man and not everyone who goes by “she” is a woman. Folks have personal reasons for the pronouns they use, and those pronouns may or may not “match” their gender identity in a way you expect. While it is commonly thought of as a plural pronoun, “they” has been used as a third-person singular pronoun since at least the 1300s. “They” is considered a gender neutral pronoun, and is often easier for folks to incorporate into their speech than neopronouns like ze/hir/hirs or ey/em/eirs. There are many more gender neutral third-person pronouns out there!

What are neopronouns?
The term “neopronoun” refers to pronouns developed since the 19th or 20th centuries. These pronouns are usually non-gendered. “Ze/hir/hirs” and “ey/em/eirs”, noted above, are examples of neopronouns. MyPronouns.org has an excellent page on neopronouns, and you can take an even deeper dive into neopronouns via this article from the New York Times.

Are there gender-neutral pronouns in other languages?
Yes! While this guide is written for English users, it’s important to know that English is not the default and there are lots of different pronoun systems out there. Some languages use one pronoun for everyone regardless of gender (Swahili: yeye; Tagalog: siya). Some only differentiate gender in how the pronoun is written, but they are pronounced the same when speaking (Mandarin: spoken tā; written 她 for she, 他 for he). Some languages have formally adopted a gender neutral pronoun alongside established masculine and feminine pronouns (Swedish: hen).

In some languages that are more heavily gendered (such as romance languages like Spanish, French, Italian), queer and trans folks have developed gender neutral alternatives to pronouns and adjectives. In Spanish, el/ello (singular/plural) are masculine pronouns and ella/ellas are feminine ones, but in recent years people across countries and generations have been using elle/elles as a gender-neutral alternative, both for folks who identify as non-binary and to refer to groups of mixed or unknown gender.

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1 “Ze” and “hir” are pronounced like “zee” and “here”. “Ey/em/eirs” is pronounced like “they/them/their” without the initial “th” sounds.
How do you use pronouns in a sentence?

- **She/her/hers**: “She is a postdoc and wrote that paper herself. That research is hers. I like her and also her work.”
- **He/him/his**: “He is a postdoc and wrote that paper himself. That research is his. I like him and also his work.”
- **They/them/their**: “They are a postdoc and wrote that paper themselves/themself\(^2\). That research is theirs. I like them and also their work.”
- **Ze/hir/hirs**: “Ze is a postdoc and wrote that paper hirself. That research is hirs. I like hir and also hir work.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Pronoun (who)</th>
<th>Object Pronoun (to whom)</th>
<th>Possessive Adjective (whose + noun)</th>
<th>Possessive Pronoun (whose)</th>
<th>Reflexive Pronoun</th>
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How do you use pronouns in conversation?

If you’re not sure what someone’s pronouns are:

“Hey, I just met Joy. Do you know what pronouns they use?”

“Oh, yeah, she uses she/her pronouns.”

“Thanks. Yeah, she seems nice! I’m excited to be working with her!”

If someone uses the wrong pronouns for another person:

“I was talking with Azure, and he was telling me about grad school. Sounds like it’s going well.”

“Oh, that’s good. By the way, Azure uses they/them pronouns.”

“Oh, shoot, thanks for letting me know.”

“No problem! What else did they say about their program?”

“Haha, well, for starters, they’re super busy!”

What do I do when I use the wrong pronoun?

Correct yourself immediately and then move on. A quick, “I’m sorry” is not a bad idea either. Some examples:

- “She’s such a good TA. I’m sorry, I meant, he’s such a good TA. He’s really patient with all my questions.”
- “I really liked how he—I mean, they handled that situation.”

2 Usage varies.
If you learn that you have misgendered someone (using the wrong pronoun/gendered language to refer to a person) but the moment to apologize has passed, it’s not a bad idea to apologize privately later. The apology should be succinct, include an acknowledgement of the correct pronouns, and avoid any mention of your own feelings. A good apology could sound something like this:

- “Hey, I know I used the wrong pronoun for you earlier, and I just wanted to apologize for that. I know you use ze/hir pronouns, and I’ll get it right next time.”
- “I just wanted to say, I’m sorry I referred to you as a man earlier. I know you’re a woman, and I know what I said was really hurtful, and it won’t happen again.”

If you don’t think you’ll be able to give an apology without saying that it’s hard for you to get their pronouns right, expressing how terrible and awful of a person you think you are, or otherwise centering yourself and your feelings, it is better not to apologize at all. Process your feelings with someone else and show how you’ve learned by getting it right next time.

If you misgender someone and they are not present, it’s usually best not to apologize. It may be a good idea to inform others who were present of the mistake and give them the correct information (e.g., you used the wrong name), or you can simply get it right next time.

When/where should I share/ask for pronouns in a professional setting?
- Small meetings: Have everyone introduce themselves with their name and pronouns.
- Large meetings: Have everyone write their pronouns on their name tags.
- Email signatures: Put your pronouns in your email signature next to your name

Why are pronouns important?
Aside from being a useful part of speech, using the correct pronouns for someone shows them a basic level of respect. Just as it’s inappropriate to continuously refer to someone by the wrong name or a nickname they don’t like, it is inappropriate to continuously refer to someone with the wrong pronouns.

Additional Resources
For more information on pronouns, visit MyPronouns.org or contact the SAFS Diversity Specialist at safsdeij@uw.edu.

Pronoun information and resources specific to UW can be found on the following pages:
- UW Registrar: Pronouns information page
- UW IT: Pronouns in Identity.UW
- POD online training: Pronouns: Why They Are Important
- UW Brand: UMAC Equitable Language Guide