

## Pronouns – What are they and why they matter

### What are pronouns?

Pronouns are “any of a small set of words (such as I, she, he, you, it, we or they) in a language that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases...” (source <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pronoun>)

E.g. – In the sentence “That is Alex’s bag”, Alex would be the noun. A pronoun could be used instead: “That is his bag.”

In the sentence “I found the owner of the cat”, the owner of the cat would be the noun phrase. A pronoun could be used instead: “I found her owner.”

### Why are pronouns important?

Pronouns can play a part in a person’s identity. Think about it this way – Why did you buy the clothes that are in your wardrobe? It is because you like them, right? You like how you look in them, your style is a part of you. Clothes, shoes, hair styles, make up, nicknames – They all help a person express themselves. Pronouns are another way for a person to express their identity.

### But why now? Is this a new fad?

Turns out it’s not a new fad (source <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2018/09/05/the-long-long-history-and-bright-future-genderless-they/LhGlzOTm6PPKMKws8cE2SN/story.html> ).

Discussions regarding a gender-neutral pronoun were happening in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Fast forward to the present day – The world is more connected, people in the LGBTQIA+ community are more accepted, and people with similar thoughts and ideas have been able to meet. This has resulted in more safe spaces being formed, where people can openly be themselves and can explore different ways of expressing themselves. Openly declaring your personal pronouns can be scary, especially if they are different from how people currently perceive you.

### What are all the pronouns?

The English language is constantly evolving, so it would be impossible to list all the pronouns. Below is an example of some of the more common ones, along with how to use them:

**She/her/hers/herself** - When I tell Alex a joke, she laughs. When I greet a friend, I hug her.

**He/him/his/himself** - When I tell Alex a joke, he laughs. When I greet a friend, I hug him.

**They/them/their/theirs/themselves** - When I tell Alex a joke, they laugh. When I greet a friend, I hug them.

**Xe/xem/xyr/xyrs/xemself** – When I tell Alex a joke, xe laughs. When I greet a friend, I hug xem.

**E/em/eir/eirs/emself** – When I tell Alex a joke, e laughs. When I greet a friend, I hug em.

Check out [https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/English\\_neutral\\_pronouns](https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/English_neutral_pronouns) for a list of English pronouns, and <https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Pronouns> for information on pronouns in other languages.

FAQs –

**How do I know what pronoun to use for a person?**

Ask them.

**My friend Sunny says he uses she/her/he/him/they/them. What does this mean?**

It means your friend Sunny is comfortable with being called she, he or they. Some people have a single pronoun set they identify with, some people can have multiple.

**My friend Dean has changed their pronouns from he/him to they/them. But I accidentally referred to them as him. Am I a bad friend?**

Did you do it on purpose? No? Then you are not a bad friend. It can take some time to get used to changes, and as long as you make the effort to use the correct pronouns and apologise/correct yourself when you mess up, it should be clear that you are respecting Dean's pronouns.

**Isn't they/them used for more than one person? How can it possibly be used to refer to a single person?**

They/them is already being used to refer to a single person in modern English.

Example: A new coordinator has been hired and a co-worker asks if you've met the coordinator.

Co-worker: Have you met the new coordinator?

You: No, I haven't met them yet.

Because you don't know their name or pronouns, you can either refer to them as the "new coordinator" or go for the simple "them".

*Note – Despite being for a single person, it is still "they are" rather than "they is" ([source](#)).*

**If I use the wrong pronouns, it isn't a big deal, right?**

Wrong – If you are doing this on purpose, it is disrespecting the person.

Imagine this: Your name is Sam. You tell everyone your name is Sam. But a person comes up to you and says, "You look more like a John to me." That person then refuses to call you Sam, and only calls you John.

That person is being disrespectful.

Still have more questions? Give them a Google, or reach out to us at [RainbowNetwork@linz.govt.nz](mailto:RainbowNetwork@linz.govt.nz)