

Gender Identity & Pronoun Resources

Building community is central to the mission of DMC. In order to uphold our commitment to inclusivity and equity, we have created this document to share with our staff and volunteers to help educate our discussions and answer frequently asked questions around gender identity and pronoun usage.

Please note that gender neutral pronouns have been in use in the English language since the middle ages and have varied greatly across time and cultures since.

What does LGBTQIA2S or LGBTQIA+ stand for?

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual or Ally, 2S is Two Spirit, and the + acknowledges the fact that there are quite a few other terms people use to identify themselves.

We won't go through every term above in detail, but we wanted to provide you with some information to get you started.

Glossary of Terms

(source: [npr.org](https://www.npr.org/2015/06/15/411811111/a-guide-to-gender-identity-terms) : A Guide to Gender Identity Terms)

Sex refers to a person's biological status and is typically assigned at birth, usually on the basis of external anatomy. **Sex is typically categorized as male, female or intersex.**

Gender is often defined as a social construct of norms, behaviors and roles that varies between societies and over time. **Gender is often categorized as male, female or nonbinary.**

Gender identity is one's own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. **Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not outwardly visible to others.**

For most people, gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth, the American Psychological Association notes. For transgender people, gender identity differs in varying degrees from the sex assigned at birth.

Gender expression is how a person presents gender outwardly, through behavior, clothing, voice or other perceived characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine or feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Cisgender, or simply **cis**, is an adjective that describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender, or simply **trans**, is an adjective used to describe someone whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. A transgender man, for example, is someone who was listed as female at birth but whose gender identity is male.

Cisgender and transgender have their origins in Latin-derived prefixes of "cis" and "trans" — cis, meaning "on this side of" and trans, meaning "across from" or "on the other side of." Both adjectives are used to describe experiences of someone's gender identity.

Nonbinary is a term that can be used by people who do not describe themselves or their genders as fitting into the categories of man or woman. A range of terms are used to refer to these experiences; **nonbinary and genderqueer** are among the terms that are sometimes used.

Agender is an adjective that can describe a person who does not identify as any gender.

Gender-expansive is an adjective that can describe someone with a more flexible gender identity than might be associated with a typical gender binary.

Gender transition is a process a person may take to bring themselves and/or their bodies into alignment with their gender identity. It's not just one step. Transitioning can include any, none or all of the following: telling one's friends, family and co-workers; changing one's name and pronouns; updating legal documents; medical interventions such as hormone therapy; or surgical intervention, often called gender confirmation surgery.

Gender dysphoria refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity. Not all trans people experience dysphoria, and those who do may experience it at varying levels of intensity.

Gender dysphoria is a diagnosis listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Some argue that such a diagnosis inappropriately pathologizes gender incongruence, while others contend that a diagnosis makes it easier for transgender people to access necessary medical treatment.

Sexual orientation refers to the enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or other genders, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and straight orientations.

People don't need to have had specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation. They need not have had any sexual experience at all. They need not be in a relationship, dating or partnered with anyone for their sexual orientation to be validated. For example, if a bisexual woman is partnered with a man, that does not mean she is not still bisexual.

Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity. As GLAAD [notes](#), "Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. For example, a person who transitions from male to female and is attracted solely to men would typically identify as a straight woman. A person who transitions from female to male and is attracted solely to men would typically identify as a gay man."

Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe people with differences in reproductive anatomy, chromosomes or hormones that don't fit typical definitions of male and female.

Intersex can refer to a number of natural variations, some of them [laid out by InterAct](#). Being intersex is not the same as being nonbinary or transgender, which are terms typically related to gender identity.

Identifying as Two Spirit

(source: smithsonianmag.com: The National Museum of the American Indian, “LGBTQIA+ Pride and Two-Spirit People”)

In the acronym LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/ally), the “+” acknowledges other identities that are not included. One identity that often gets incorporated at the end is Two-Spirit, which is an umbrella term for Native people who have both male and female spirits and acknowledges different gender identities present among Native people of North America. There are also social, spiritual, and community roles for Two-Spirit people within their Native nations, and some Two-Spirit people prefer words from their Indigenous languages for gender variance.

The term Two-Spirit originated in 1990 by Myra Laramie (Cree) at the Third Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in Winnipeg. It is a translation of “*niizh manidoowag*” or “two spirits” in the Anishinaabe language. While Native people might use the terms gay, lesbian, or transgender, Two-Spirit is a term created by Native people for Native people. More people are becoming familiar with the term, and there are Two-Spirit events across North America, including the annual Two-Spirit Powwow in San Francisco. This Pride Month, I interviewed Native people from various tribal communities about being Two-Spirit and how they celebrate that identity.

Frequently Asked Questions

(source: University of Wisconsin LGBTQ+ Resource Center)

What is a pronoun?

-A **pronoun** is a word that refers to either the people talking (“I” or “you”) or someone or something that is being talked about (like “she”, “it”, “them”, and “this”). Gender pronouns (he/she/they/ze etc.) specifically refer to the person you are referring to.

Pronouns are part of someone’s gender expression, and people can have multiple sets of pronouns for themselves (such as using both he/him/his and they/them/theirs). Pronouns are not “preferred” but instead are required for respectful communication. Not only transgender or nonbinary communities use pronouns, as it is something we all use and have since we were little.

What if I make a mistake?

-It’s okay. Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like “Sorry, I meant (insert pronoun)”.

If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on.

A lot of the time it can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right. Please don’t! It is inappropriate and makes the person who was misgendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you, which is not their responsibility.

You may hear someone use the wrong pronoun for someone from time to time. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been misgendered. This means saying something like “Alex uses the pronoun she,” and then moving on. If other people are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! Please let a staff member know.

It may be appropriate to approach them and say something like “I noticed that you were getting referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier, and I know that that can be really hurtful. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your pronouns?” Follow up if necessary, but take your cues from the comfort level of the individual. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.

How do I ask someone their pronouns?

-“What pronouns do you use?” or “Can you remind me what pronouns you use?” It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as making a hurtful assumption. Also asking about when you can use those pronouns helps protect people from being outed; this can sound like “Are there any situations where you don’t want me to use these pronouns?”

If you are asking as part of an introduction exercise and you want to quickly explain what gender pronouns are, you can try something like this: “Tell us your name, where you come from, and your pronouns. That means the pronouns that you use in reference to yourself. For example, I’m Xena, I’m from Amazon Island, and I like to be referred to with she, her, and hers pronouns. So you could say, ‘she went to her car’ if you were talking about me.”

It is important to remember that by consistently asking people for their pronouns, you can help create a more normalized and safe way for others to share their pronouns, which they may not have been able to do before.

However, there are multiple reasons why someone may not want to share their pronouns in a group setting. If someone does not share their pronouns, feel free to use their name as a placeholder or ask in a more private setting.

Why is it important to respect someone’s pronouns? How is this more inclusive?

-You can’t always know what someone’s pronouns are by looking at them. Asking and correctly using someone’s pronouns is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity.

When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (often all of the above). All major professional American psychological and psychiatric associations recognize that inclusive language usage for LGBTQ+ youth and adults drastically decreases experiences of depression, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, and other negative mental health factors.

It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else’s gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive.

How do I use they/them as a singular pronoun? (source: apastyle.apa.org “singular they”)

The singular “they” is a generic third-person pronoun used in English. It’s not the only third-person singular pronoun—other third-person singular pronouns are “she” and “he” as well as less common options such as “ze” or “hen.”

Although the term singular “they” may be unfamiliar, you’ve probably heard and used the singular “they” in conversation throughout your life. Here is an example:

A person should enjoy their vacation.

The noun in this sentence is “person,” and the pronoun is “their.”

If you are talking about a specific, known person, always use that person’s pronouns. The person’s pronouns might be “she/her,” “they/them,” “he/him,” or something else—just ask to find out! It is also good practice for an individual to volunteer what pronouns they use so that others do not have to ask.

If a person uses “she” or “he,” do not use “they” instead. Likewise, if a person uses “they,” do not switch to “he” or “she.” Use the pronouns the person uses.

Kai is a nonbinary person. They attend university in their home state of Vermont and are majoring in chemistry.

When “they” is the subject of a sentence, “they” takes a plural verb regardless of whether “they” is meant to be singular or plural. For example, say “they are,” not “they is.” The singular “they” works similarly to the singular “you”—even though “you” may refer to one person or multiple people, you should say “you are,” not “you is.” However, if the noun in one sentence is a word like “individual” or a person’s name, use a singular verb.

Common Pronouns

(source: bethesdaproject.org/pronouns)

SUBJECT PRONOUN	OBJECT PRONOUN	POSSESSIVE PRONOUN	REFLEXIVE PRONOUN
_____ is a volunteer.	I am proud of _____.	That is ____ book. That book is _____.	That person likes _____.
She	her	her/hers	herself
He	him	his	himself
Ze*	hir	hir/hirs	hirsself
Ze*	zir	zir/zirs	zirsself
E or Ey	em	eir/eirs	eirsself or emself
Per	per	per/pers	persself
Hu	hum	hus/hus	humself
They (are)	them	their/theirs	themselves
Name	Name	Name's/Name's	Name

****Additional alternate spellings for “ze” are “zie”, “sie”, “xie”, and “xe.”***

Ze, zie, sie, xie, and xe can be pronounced like ZEE.

Hir is pronounced like HERE.

Per is short for person, and Hu is short for human.

History of Pronouns

(source: The Atlantic: “Where Gender-Neutral Pronouns Come From”, June 4, 2021)

Today’s gender-neutral English-language pronouns make space not just for two genders, but for many more, serving as a way for people who fall outside the binary of “man” and “woman” to describe themselves. In recent years especially, they’ve become a staple of dating apps, college campuses, and email signatures. In 2020, a Trevor Project survey found that one in four LGBTQ youth uses pronouns other than *helhim* and *shelher*, and the American Dialect Society named the singular *they* its word of the decade.

Meanwhile, commentators have forecast the demise of language once again. A 2018 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed went so far as to claim that using *they/them* pronouns amounted to “sacrilege,” and an Australian politician said that an effort to celebrate *they/them* pronouns was “political correctness gone mad.” Last month, after the singer Demi Lovato came out as nonbinary, a conservative commentator called *they/them* pronouns “poor grammar” and an example of “low academic achievement.” Bundled into these arguments is the idea that gender-neutral pronouns are a new phenomenon, an outgrowth of the internet that is only now spreading into other spheres—suggesting that the gender fluidity they describe is also a fad.

Until relatively recently, gender-neutral pronouns were something people used to describe others—mixed groups, or individuals whose gender was unknown—not something people used to describe themselves. But even though people did not, in Young’s time, personally identify as nonbinary in the way we understand it today (though some identified as “neuter”), neutral pronouns existed—as did an understanding that the language we had to describe gender was insufficient. For more than three centuries, at least, English speakers have yearned for more sophisticated ways to talk about gender.

LIKELY THE OLDEST gender-neutral pronoun in the English language is the singular *they*, which was, for centuries, a common way to identify a person whose gender was indefinite. For a time in the 1600s, medical texts even referred to individuals who did not accord with binary gender standards as *they/them*. The pronoun's fortunes were reversed only in the 18th century, when the notion that the singular *they* was grammatically incorrect came into vogue among linguists.

In place of *they*, though, came a raft of new pronouns. According to Dennis Baron, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who wrote the definitive history of gender-neutral pronouns in his book *What's Your Pronoun?*, English speakers have proposed 200 to 250 pronouns since the 1780s. Although most petered out almost immediately after their introduction, a few took on lives of their own.

Note: The first recorded singular use of the pronoun *they* was in the 14th century in the French poem "William the Wolf."