

# Gender Identity, Gender Pronouns, & Definitions

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Pronouns are one way of identifying a person's gender. We are taught to believe we know or can assume someone's gender just by their appearance. We are not always right, and can offend someone, often unintentionally, by *mis-pronoun*-ing them. Because gender seems obvious, it can go unquestioned. Although I identify as a genderconforming cisgender woman, it is important that I include my pronouns in my signature in the hope that it will start a conversation about gender identity, gender expression, cisgender privilege, among other important issues.

For those who do not live with cisgender privilege, the statistics around discrimination and abuse are staggering, and too often, deadly. Incorporating these discussions into our homes and workspaces is a life and death matter. Below, I provide some information you might find helpful in those discussions.

### A Few Definitions

#### **Pronouns**

- Pronouns are based on how a person identifies. For example: If Xena's pronouns are she, her, and hers, you could say "Xena ate her food because she was hungry."

#### **Gender Identity**

- A person's internal, personal sense of being a specific gender.
- A socially constructed norm that individuals may or may not adhere to.
- For a person who identifies as transgender, their birth-assigned sex and their own internal sense of gender identity may not match.

#### **Gender Expression**

- The physical presentation of self as a gendered person through culturally identified

symbols

and markers (hair length/style, clothes, among others).

- A person whose gender identity and/or gender markers blur society's socially constructed gender norms may identify as "genderqueer," "gender fluid," or "gender nonconforming."

## **Transgender**

- An umbrella term that describes all gender fluid people, including but not limited to: cross dressers, gender benders, MTF (male to female), FTM (female to male), those who may or may not have had or ever plan to have SAS (Sexual Affirmation Surgery), etc.
- Transgender is not a noun or a verb; it is an adjective
- e.g., say "a transgender person sees..."
  - not: "a transgender sees..."
  - not: "a transgendered person sees..."
- Identifying as a transgender individual represents a person's gender identity, not their sexualorientation. Sexual orientation represents to whom one is attracted. Transgender individuals may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, etc.

## **Cisgender**

- When gender identity matches gender expression;
- Being cisgender is an unearned benefit/privilege that those who identify as transgender or gender fluid do not receive, such as: a sense of belonging, being given the benefit of the doubt in most situations, not being targeted based on gender identity, among many others.

## **Why is it important to respect people's Pronouns?**

- 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. You can say, "I use she/her/hers as my pronouns, which do you use?"
- When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above.)
- 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 can also be oppressive.

### **What are some commonly used pronouns?**

- She, her, hers and he, him, his are the most commonly used pronouns.
  - There are also lots of gender-neutral pronouns in use. Here are a few you might hear:
    - They, them, theirs (Xena ate their food because they were hungry.)
    - Ze, hir (Xena ate hir food because ze was hungry.)
- Ze is pronounced like “zee” and can also be spelled zie or xe, and replaces she/he/they.
- Hir is pronounced like “here” and replaces her/hers/him/his/they/theirs.
- Just my name please! (Xena ate Xena's food because Xena was hungry)

### **Some General Guidelines for using Pronouns:**

- When in doubt, ask.
- If you are not able to ask the person which pronoun they use (e.g., the person is in the media), it is best to use the term “they” until you are told differently.
- When writing about a transgender person or someone who identifies as gender fluid, do not use quotation marks around the pronoun referring to that person.
- Do not use the terms “he/she” or “it” to refer to a transgender person or someone who identifies as gender fluid (unless they specifically ask you to). These are typically considered offensive slurs.
- It is most inclusive to use the terms they and them, even when referring to a single individual.
- If you make a mistake, simply apologize, show yourself some compassion for having learned strongly enforced inflexible gender stereotypes really well, and promptly challenge yourself to work on this and make fewer mistakes in the future.
- Consider introducing yourself with your pronouns, “Hi, I'm Dena. My pronouns are: she/her/hers. Whatever it takes to get the conversation started!”

Sources: Holling J. Smith-Borne; [www.bodieslikeours.org](http://www.bodieslikeours.org); Jessica Pettitt, I am... Safe Zone; Mateo Medina, Hampshire College; Abby L. Ferber; Kerianne Smith.