



# MWRA's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee

Patterson Riley, Co-Chair • Michele Gillen, Co-Chair • Contact: [Tomeka.Cribb.Jones@mwra.com](mailto:Tomeka.Cribb.Jones@mwra.com)

## Gender Pronouns Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

The way that people experience gender is far more complex and diverse than just “man” or “woman.” This guide answers some of your questions about gender and pronouns.

### What is the difference between gender identity and gender expression?

Gender identity is a person's internal sense of what their own gender is, who they are as a woman, man, both, neither, etc. Gender expression is how a person outwardly exhibits their gender, typically through clothing, hairstyle, makeup, grooming, behavior, mannerisms, actions, etc. Gender identity and gender expression are distinct from one another and may not fall in the same place on the gender spectrum, nor correspond to a person's physiology or designated sex at birth. For example, someone may identify as a man, yet dress in a feminine manner.

### What is a pronoun and what are gender pronouns?

A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (I or you) or someone or something that is being talked about (e.g., she, it, them, this). Gender pronouns are the pronouns that we use to refer to people in sentences and conversation as a substitute for a person's name, like he, she, they, ze, hir, etc. Gender pronouns are the pronouns that a person chooses to use for themselves. Some people don't use gender pronouns and use their name instead.

Gender pronouns can look like and are not limited to:

- he/him/his (masculine pronouns)
- she/her/hers (feminine pronouns)
- they/them/theirs (neutral pronouns)
- ze/zir/zirs (neutral pronouns)
- ze/hir/hirs (neutral pronouns)

### What are gender neutral pronouns?

Gender neutral pronouns are pronouns that do not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed, like the singular “they.” Usually, gender neutral pronouns are acceptable to use when you don't yet know if a person goes by another set(s) of pronouns. Some people identify as nonbinary (feel their gender cannot be defined within the margins of the gender binary; neither entirely man nor woman) and use gender neutral pronouns, like they/them/theirs.

### Why do gender pronouns matter?

You can't always know what someone's pronouns are based on their name or appearance and when someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (often all the above). Gender pronouns matter because they represent how someone identifies and when used correctly, shows respect for someone's gender identity and creates an inclusive environment. Asking for, remembering, and using someone's gender pronouns is one of the most basic ways to show your respect, just like using someone's name is.



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### What if I or others make a mistake?

People make mistakes and it can be a bit difficult to adjust to using someone's correct gender pronouns. If you accidentally misgender someone (calling them by the wrong gender/pronoun), simply apologize and continue the conversation using the correct gender/pronoun: "Jamila is going abroad. She - sorry, they said they are really excited for their trip." You should not make a big deal out of your mistake or draw a lot of attention to it. You might have a follow up conversation with the person you referred to incorrectly to apologize: "I'm really sorry I used the wrong pronouns for you in that meeting earlier. I know you go by 'they/them' and I will make sure I get it right next time." If others make a mistake, you can have a private conversation to remind them of the person's correct pronouns or gently reinforce them in conversation: "Where did you say they went abroad?"

### How do I ask someone what their pronouns are?

When meeting someone for the first time, you can share your own pronouns and ask for theirs: "I'm Katie, my pronouns are she/they. What's your name and pronouns?"

Here are some other ways to ask someone what their pronouns are:

- "What gender pronouns should I use to refer to you?"
- "I don't want to make any assumptions, so what gender pronouns do you use?"
- "How should I refer to you in conversations?"
- "Can you remind me of which pronouns you like for yourself?"

### How can I support my LGBTQ+ colleagues?

- Not assuming someone's gender based on their name or appearance, as these assumptions are not always correct and are based on harmful gender expectations or stereotypes.
- Share your pronouns in introductions and ask if people are comfortable sharing theirs.
- Adding your pronouns to your email signature and encouraging your colleagues to add pronouns to their email signatures too.

### How can I add my gender pronouns to my email signature?

To create or edit your email signature in Microsoft Outlook: Click File > Options > Mail > Signatures. Click the signature you want to edit, and then make your changes in the Edit signature box. When you're done, select Save > OK.

Example email signature:

[First Name, Last Name] (Pronouns)  
[Job Title]  
Massachusetts Water Resources Authority  
[email]  
[phone]

Jane Doe (they/them)  
Staff Engineer  
Massachusetts Water Resources Authority  
jane@mwra.com  
(617) 123-4567



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### Links to Resources on Pronouns:

- "Gender Pronouns," Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus (LGBTQ+) Resource Center:  
<https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>
- "Resources on Personal Pronouns," MyPronouns.org: <https://www.mypronouns.org/>
- "A teaching tool for breaking the big concept of gender down into bite-sized, digestible pieces," The Genderbread Person:  
<https://www.genderbread.org/>
- "Resources: Tools for equality and inclusion," Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org/resources>
- "It's Time for 'They'," New York Times (July 10, 2019):  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/opinion/pronoun-they-gender.html>
- "Gender Pronouns Are Changing. It's Exhilarating," New York Times (September 21, 2021):  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/opinion/gender-pronouns-they.html>