



A Guide to Pronouns: A Quick History and Best Practices Video Transcript

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Gender Neutral Pronouns: A Quick History and Best Practices. By LGBTQ + Services at MIT.

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Hello, I'm Amy and my pronouns are they, them, theirs.

I'll be your virtual guide as we learn about the history and use of pronouns in the context of the English language.

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Our goal is to re-examine our views on gender and gender stereotypes. These views shape our thoughts and actions as we interact with people in the world.

We will learn how to help reduce misunderstandings that arise from gendered assumptions.

And, we will learn tips to create an inclusive environment for all genders.

So let's get started!

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You might have heard people share their name and pronouns with you, like I did at the beginning of this video.

Pronouns like "she, her, hers."

Or “he, him, his.”

Or even... “they, them, theirs.” What does *that* mean?

Is it new?

Is it old?

Where did it come from?

...and how do you use it in a sentence...?

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Actually, the use of a singular personal pronoun is not a modern invention. There have been many alternatives over the years.

The earliest recorded use of “they” as a gender neutral personal pronoun was in the 14th century in a French poem called William the Werewolf.

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In the 1850s, there were many variations of gender neutral pronouns used in newspapers such as

Xe

Ze

Phe

Er

Ou

And ne.

There was a brief attempt to use one gender neutral pronoun in the 1880s called “thon”, but it didn’t become popular.

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In the late 1970s there was another public push for gender neutral pronouns, and “le” was briefly used before dying out.

Fast forward to the 2010s, and we see a sharp rise in gender neutral pronouns from something talked about primarily within LGBTQ+ communities, to a broader global conversation.

This was aided, in part, by the use of social media and the greater visibility of transgender and non-binary people.

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In 2019, the singular use of “they” was the word of the year according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

The singular use “they” is also accepted as grammatically correct according to:

The Associated Press.

Chicago Manual Style.

Oxford English Dictionary.

And the National Council of English Teachers.

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So who uses “they”? Well, a ton of people!

People from different time periods.

People of different generations.

People of different gender identities.

People of different sexual orientations.

People from different ethnicities.

And probably you too!

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Here are some examples:

“This is Mike, they’re a good friend of mine.”

“I missed a call from the dentist. I have to call them back.”

“Did someone leave their phone in my car?”

Can you think of a time that you used they/them/theirs?

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“They, them, theirs” are also *not* the only gender neutral pronouns. But the important thing to remember is that we don’t know what someone’s pronouns are without asking them. Oftentimes, people subconsciously assume someone’s pronouns based off of gender stereotypes such as:

This person is wearing pink and has long hair, so I will use “she.”

Or: This person is wearing a tie and has short hair, so I will use “he.”

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However, some people go by two or more pronouns.

Some people don’t care what pronouns you use for them, as long as it’s respectful.

And some people don’t go by pronouns at all and just want you to use their name.

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As you can see, gender stereotypes aren’t a good way of knowing someone’s pronouns. And pronouns don’t necessarily correlate to someone’s gender identity.

All of this might be new or confusing, but the point is that pronouns are a way that we acknowledge people and can affirm their identities.

And it doesn't take much to be respectful and mindful of others.

Here are some tips.

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Don't dismiss someone's identity and/or expression as if it isn't a valid part of who they are.

Don't ignore moments where we could educate others on being gender inclusive.

Don't ask intrusive or personal questions of trans and non-binary people.

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A few other don'ts are:

Don't make assumptions about people based off of gender stereotypes.

Don't use binary language like "he" or "she" if "they" would be appropriate. Such as: everyone should wash their hands.

And don't be afraid to make mistakes! We're all learning together and trying to be better.

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And here are some do's!

Do be more mindful in your words and actions, such as sharing your pronouns to allow others to share theirs if they feel comfortable.

Do encourage people within your communities to be more gender inclusive.

Do be patient. Everyone is on their own journey of understanding.

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Do admit mistakes. It can be hard to acknowledge the way your actions or words have harmed someone, but all of us have made mistakes. Let's learn from them and strive to be better next time.

And finally, do continue to educate yourself. We live in a constantly changing world of new information. Look things up, talk to others, and know that you're building a really strong foundation of inclusivity.

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Here are a few of the many great websites with additional resources if you'd like to learn more about pronouns, gender identities under the transgender and non-binary spectrum, and general LGBTQ+ resources.

You can always pause this video if you'd like to write down a couple websites to look up later.

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Let's stay in touch!

You can connect with us over our social media networks, send us an email, or visit us on our two websites. We'd love to hear from you.

If you have any questions, email lbgt@mit.edu.

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This video was created by Lauryn McNair and narrated by Sushma Saha with editing by Michael Sysak.

If you'd like more information about pronouns please read through the following resources. And if you'd like to implement pronoun best practices for your group or department then go to the "Resources" section of the lbgtq.mit.edu website to learn more.

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Thanks for watching!

And be on the lookout for more videos like these from LGBTQ+ Services. These videos will be put on the lbgtq.mit.edu website under the "Resources" section.