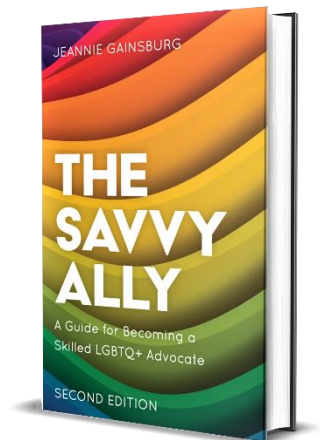


Pronouns: How to Properly Share, Gather, and Use Them

(Sections of this handout were taken from *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*)

This handout offers best-practice tips for sharing your pronouns, gathering pronouns from others without making it awkward, and using pronouns in a respectful way.



SHARING YOUR PRONOUNS

Sharing your pronouns, even if they're obvious and you never get misgendered, is a great ally action. It helps to normalize the practice, making it more comfortable and safer for others to share theirs. Their pronouns may not be as obvious. Creating a culture where it becomes the norm for people to display their pronouns helps to avoid those embarrassing moments when you aren't sure how to refer to someone. Another great reason to share your pronouns is that it lets people know that you understand the need for transgender-inclusive spaces and that you support all kinds of people and families, whether they conform to society's gendered expectations or not. Some great places to share your pronouns are on your business card, under your email signature, next to your name on your video conferencing platform, on a pin, and on your name badge.

POP QUIZ

When I share my pronouns, should I share 1, 2, or 3 (for example: she, she/her, or she/her/hers)?

- A. I should only share one. Why waste ink?
- B. I should share two. It's what all the cool kids are doing.
- C. I should share three. It normalizes the behavior for those who use new pronouns, like *ze* and *co*, and who often need to educate others about how to conjugate them properly.
- D. There doesn't seem to be a consensus regarding which is best.

Answer: D

Although this may change over time, currently there doesn't seem to be any recommendations regarding how many forms of your pronouns you should share. But apparently, all the cool kids ARE sharing only two. Sharing three is so 2020.

GATHERING PRONOUNS FROM OTHERS

Directly asking folks for their pronouns can put them in an awkward spot if they don't feel comfortable sharing. So, how do we gather pronouns in a respectful way? Here are a few pointers.

One on One: When talking one on one with someone, you don't need to know their pronouns. We use the ungendered term *you*, so there's usually no need to ask.

Small Groups: When you're having a small group conversation, start by listening to the pronouns being used by others and mirror those terms. If you're in a situation where you feel like the most respectful thing to do is ask, offer your pronouns first and use language that doesn't directly ask for pronouns. For example, "I'm Jeannie. My pronouns are she/her/hers. How may I refer to you?"

In Large Numbers: The best way to gather pronouns is to gather them from everyone who wants to share. This avoids having to single people out. Create systems where you invite everyone to share their pronouns, for example, in a group meeting when folks introduce themselves or on intake forms. Always make sharing optional and avoid using the phrase "preferred pronouns." Give examples of the information you're seeking in case people are confused by what you're asking.

HELPFUL HINT

When we ask people to share their pronouns, we should always state, "If you feel comfortable doing so" or "This is optional." We don't ever want to force anyone to share their pronouns. Noah, a transgender man, explains why sharing pronouns might be uncomfortable for some people.

"I vividly recall the anxiety around that feeling of not having told anyone I was trans let alone started transitioning. But I definitely knew I wasn't a girl and to state that would have been a rejection of myself and what I knew was true. That would've been a really hard time to say my pronouns because they definitely weren't *she/her*, but I didn't feel like they could be *he/him* yet either. Making pronouns optional made it so I didn't have to lie/disrespect myself or feel self-conscious of how masculine I (didn't) looked/felt."



USING PRONOUNS PROPERLY

Singular *They*: Singular *they* (i.e., using *they* to mean one person) is the most commonly used gender-neutral pronoun in the U.S. Grammatically it's used the same way you would use *they* if you were referring to a group of people. For example, you should say, "They are coming for dinner," not "They is coming for dinner." It's now generally acceptable in written and spoken English to use *they* to refer to one person. Both the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and the Oxford Dictionary have expanded their definitions of *they* to refer to a person whose gender is not known or to refer to a single person whose gender is nonbinary. *They* is a great pronoun to use if you don't know anything about someone. For example, if you're emailing about a student in general, you can say, "If a student is late to school, then they should provide a note from a parent or guardian."

Neopronouns: Neopronouns are gender-neutral pronouns that have not been officially accepted into the language. A few examples are *ze*, *per*, *co*, and *ey*. Memorizing a list of neopronouns and how to conjugate them can be overwhelming and intimidating. A best-practice ally action is to be aware of neopronouns and learn how to use them as needed. If you have a friend or coworker whose pronoun is *ze*, then it's time to get comfortable and skilled at using *ze* in its different forms.

More Than One Pronoun: Sometimes folks will share two or more pronouns, for example, *she/they* or *she/they/he*. People do this for different reasons. Some find that both or all the pronouns fit for them equally well. Some feel that *they* fits them best, but they're not offended when people use the more traditional pronouns and they offer those as an option to make it easier for others. Some folks, like gender-fluid individuals, feel that different pronouns fit for them at different times. Some folks use pronouns in English and pronouns in other languages to represent their intersectional identities and/or to indicate that they're bilingual, for example *she/ella*. If you have a relationship with the person who uses two or more pronouns, simply ask them to guide you. You might say something like, "How may I use your pronouns in a way that's most respectful to you?" If you don't know the person well, the best way to proceed is to mix it up and use both or all of the person's pronouns. This doesn't mean you need to change pronouns every time you use one, but do try to mix the use of their pronouns every few sentences or with each new conversation.

RESOURCES

MyPronouns.org: Resources on personal pronouns at: <https://www.mypronouns.org/>

Practice with Pronouns: An online tool for practicing proper pronoun use at: <https://www.practicewithpronouns.com>

Savvy Ally Action: Workshops on creating LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces, fun videos, and free ally goodies at: www.savvyallyaction.com

