How to Use Inclusive Language: Gender Pronouns

In recent years, much of our speaking and writing have evolved from using predominantly the pronouns "he/him/his" to "he/him/his" and "she/her/hers" when referring to people. This usually manifests as "her or she" or "his or her" in writing when referring to a person in a general sense when writing. However, with the awareness of gender diversity we are learning that people's gender identities cannot be assumed without asking them how they identify first. That begs the question for many, "What do we use now?"

Why "they"?

While it is still very important to ask what pronouns someone uses, we may not always be able to ask the person and thus we can use the gender-neutral pronouns they/them/theirs. Though understood by many to be only a plural set of pronouns, they/them/theirs are often used to refer to a person in the singular in ways we never really think about. For example, one could naturally say:

- Ex. "Someone forgot **their** book in the café. I feel very sorry for **them**. **They** will probably be missing it soon."

While we often casually say what was said in the example above, some question whether or not using "they" in the singular is grammatically correct. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the singular use of "they" is correct in multiple instances. These can include when referring "to an unknown or unspecified person" or "to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary". In addition, the new updated style manuals of APA and MLA both recommend the use of generic singular they over the restrictive "he or she."

How to learn and use someone's pronouns

Although pronouns are not always indicative of one's gender identity, many nonbinary, genderqueer, or genderfluid people's pronouns are they/them/theirs and they want to be referred to as such by others. It is important to refer to a person as the pronouns they tell you that they use. Defaulting to they/them/theirs when you do not know their pronouns is inclusive and polite. However, it's always a good idea to share your pronouns with others when introducing yourself. That encourages others to share theirs with you in return.

- Ex. "Hello! My name is Tommy and my pronouns are **he/him/his**."
- "It's nice to meet you, Tommy! My name is Kerry and my pronouns are **they/them/theirs**."

You may also politely ask what pronouns someone uses as well.

- Ex. "Tommy, what pronouns do you use?"
- "I use **he/him/his**. Thanks for asking!"

He/him/his, she/her/hers, and they/them/theirs are not the only singular pronouns that people can use to refer to themselves. Some people use what are often called neopronouns. These can include fae/faer/faers, ve/ver/vis, and ze/hir/hirs. Some may also use multiple sets of pronouns such as he/they or use any pronouns.

Practice using people's pronouns

We all make mistakes sometimes, and you may not get someone's pronouns right every time. When this happens, it is best to simply apologize to the person and move on knowing better. One way to lessen these mistakes is with practicing using pronouns that you may not be used to using.

Try composing a sentence or two for each person below using their pronouns in their subject, object, possessive forms.

Ex. Tommy (he/him/his)

Tommy is picking up **his** new dog from the shelter today. **He** is very excited to be bringing the dog home with **him**.

1. Ada (she/her/hers)

_____

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2. Kerry (they/them/theirs)

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3. Drew (fae/faer/faers)

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4. The unknown owner of a set of keys that you found at the park

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Works Cited and Further Reading

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