

Gender and Pronouns in Online Forms

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This document is intended to provide guidance on how to be inclusive of genders other than male and female in forms, with a selection of real forms asking for gender, and with an explanation of why each is good or bad.

When I ask companies and websites to be more inclusive of nonbinary genders, I am often asked how it can be done well. Having a PDF that I can respond with that is informative and demonstrative is my motivation for maintaining this document.

If you have any feedback or anything to contribute, please email me: cassian.lodge@gmail.com.

Thank you,

Cassian Lotte Lodge

UK

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- downloading as a PDF, 526 KB (*File > Download as... > PDF document*).

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A Brief Introduction to Genders Outside of the Binary

There are two ways of looking at gender.

Binary

In the binary model of gender, everyone is assumed to be one of two genders consistently. That is, they are either male *or* female, and their gender is consistent and persistent over time.

Non-binary

In the non-binary model of gender, there are still people who are consistently only men and there are still people who are consistently only women. There are also people who are both, are neither, are something else entirely, do not identify with gender at all, fluctuate between different genders over time, and probably many more.

It is estimated that around 0.4% of people in the United Kingdom identify “in another way” than male or female.

¹ That’s around 256,000 people at the time of writing, or 1 in 250. This is comparable to the percentage of the population who are bisexual, or the percentage of the population who are Buddhist.²

For the purposes of this document I will refer to people who identify outside of or beyond the binary of male/female as “nonbinary people”, but it should be noted that there is currently no consensus as to what these genders should be collectively named.

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Reasons to recognise and include genders outside of the binary

- It’s the decent and non-discriminatory thing to do
- You’re opening yourself up to a larger user/customer base
- Nonbinary people will be more loyal if you accept and include them
- Your data will be more accurate and valuable
- People who have undergone or intend to undergo any kind of gender transition are protected by UK law, and excluding them is discrimination

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¹ “How Many People in the United Kingdom are Nonbinary?”, November 2014:
<http://practicalandrogyny.com/2014/12/16/how-many-people-in-the-uk-are-nonbinary/>

² “Demography of the United Kingdom”, Wikipedia, July 2015:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography_of_the_United_Kingdom

Dos and Don'ts

Please note that in most cases it is unnecessary to collect information about gender. If you cannot justify asking for information about gender, do not ask. If you are asking about gender to find out something else, ask a more relevant and specific question. For example, rather than asking about gender to find out what fit of t-shirt a person prefers, consider directly asking what fit of t-shirt a person prefers.

If you are collecting information about gender in order to know how to refer to people in the third person, please read [the chapter about pronouns](#).

For the ultimate inclusive gender question:

- **DO** make your gender question optional
 - **DO** have a “decline to state” option
 - **DO** have more gender options than just male and female
 - **DO** justify asking about gender and/or pronouns, by explaining why you need it and how it will be used
- EVEN BETTER:**
- **DO** allow people to type in their gender if they wish (as an extension to the “other” option if you do not wish to stop providing explicit options for male and female respondents)
 - If you're asking about gender or titles so that you can allocate pronouns³ (such as he/him, she/her or they/them), **DO** consider asking about pronouns directly
- **DON'T** ask for information about gender unless you need it and are prepared to explain why to users/customers
 - **DON'T** provide only two gender options
 - **DON'T** prevent respondents from continuing without entering a gender
 - **DON'T** limit your system by requiring gendered titles to “match” someone's gender
 - **DON'T** assume a gender based on any other field (such as title or pronouns)
 - **DON'T** have “transgender” as a gender option
 - **DON'T** treat gender like public information. For many people, gender is very private and being outed involuntarily can be dangerous.

The most commonly used umbrella terms for genders that are not just male or just female all the time include “nonbinary” and “genderqueer”, but there is no consensus as yet in the gender-diverse community.

³ For the purposes of this document, “pronouns” refers to the words we use in place of people's names when referring to them in the third person. The most commonly used are he/him/his/his/himself and she/her/her/hers/herself. The most commonly used among nonbinary people is singular they (they/them/their/theirs/themself).

Real Examples of Gender Forms

The Good

Let's start on a positive note. These forms ask for gender in an inclusive, sensitive, elegant, clear, or efficient way.

Stop, Breathe & Think



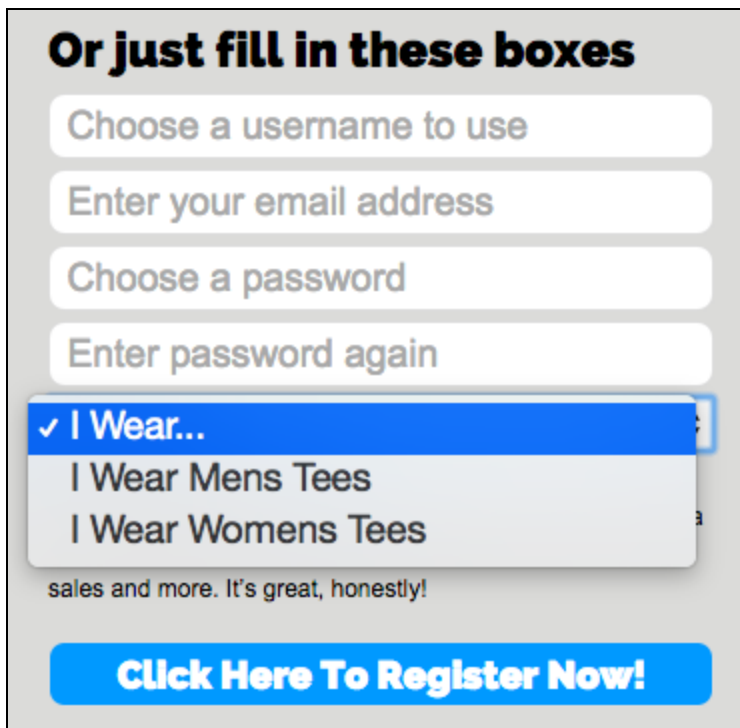
The image shows a dark blue rectangular form with a thin white border. Inside, there are four white input fields stacked vertically. The first three fields are labeled 'FIRST NAME', 'LAST NAME', and 'AGE' in blue capital letters. The fourth field is labeled 'GENDER' in blue capital letters. To the right of the 'GENDER' label are three white circular buttons with blue borders. The first button contains the letter 'M', the second contains the letter 'F', and the third contains an infinity symbol (∞).

What it is: A meditation app [\[link\]](#)

Why it's good: It's got more than two options, and it provides a third option for nonbinary/genderqueer people that doesn't limit one to a particular gender label.

Potential improvements: The question is not optional, and could be made so.

Notes: The "infinity" symbol they used can be typed: ∞



The image shows a registration form for Qwertee. At the top, it says "Or just fill in these boxes". Below this are four text input fields: "Choose a username to use", "Enter your email address", "Choose a password", and "Enter password again". Below the password fields is a dropdown menu with three options: "✓ I Wear..." (selected), "I Wear Mens Tees", and "I Wear Womens Tees". Below the dropdown menu, there is a line of text: "sales and more. It's great, honestly!". At the bottom of the form is a large blue button with the text "Click Here To Register Now!" in white.

What it is: A site that sells limited edition customer-designed t-shirts [\[link\]](#)

Why it's good: It does not ask for gender at all. It collects data on the specific information the business requires for marketing and production planning.

Potential improvements: Some people may choose different t-shirt fits at different times. I would suggest that they provide "I buy both Mens and Womens tees" as an option, and allow the answer to be left blank.

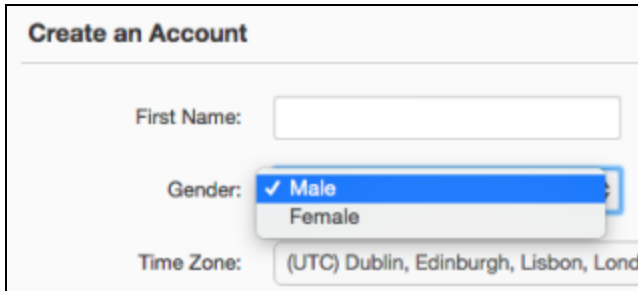
Notes: None.

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TrendWeight - before and after

What it is: A weight-tracking app that links with wireless scales to show weight trends [\[link\]](#)

Before:



Create an Account

First Name:

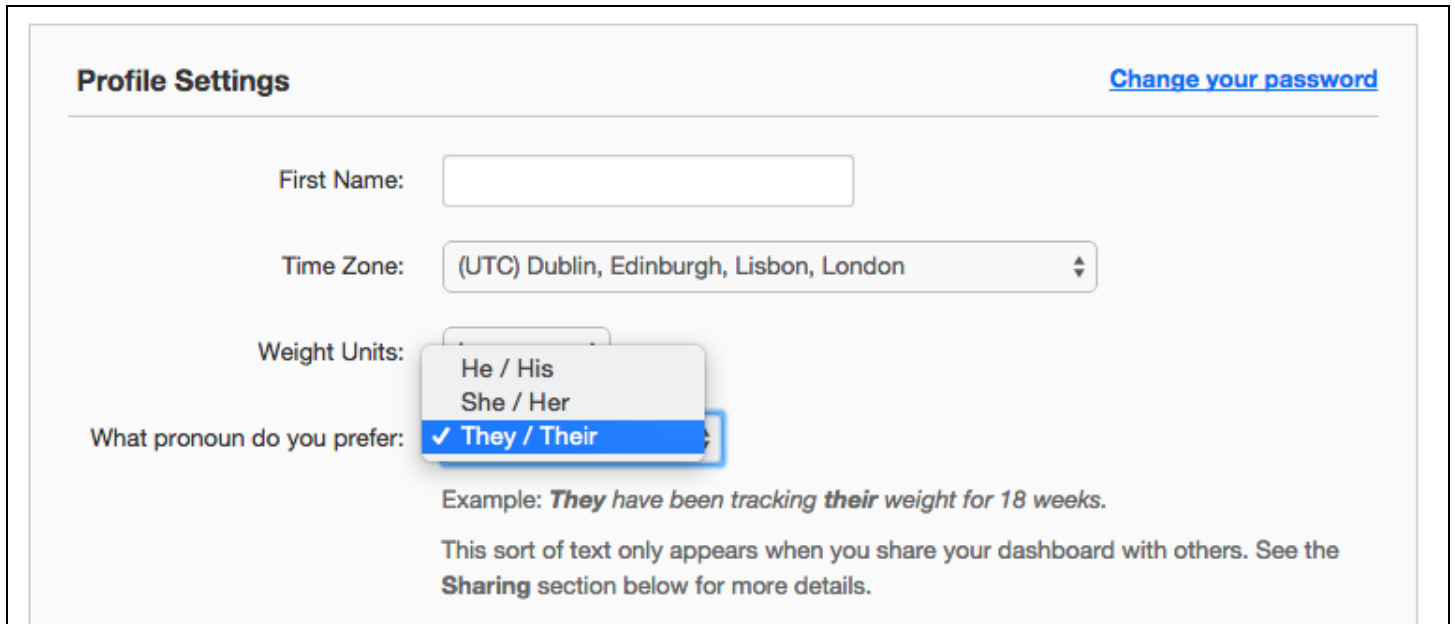
Gender: ✓ Male
Female

Time Zone: (UTC) Dublin, Edinburgh, Lisbon, London

Why it's bad:

- It's not clear why gender is required.
 - Improvement: Explain the effect a user's choice will have on the system and their profile.
- A gender is already selected by default.
 - Improvement: Make sure there is no default selection.
- In order to complete the form one must choose one of two binary genders, with no options for nonbinary people or those who prefer not to give a gender.
 - Improvement: Allow a "decline to state" option and a third gender option.

After we talked about it by email:



The screenshot shows a 'Profile Settings' form. At the top right is a link 'Change your password'. The form contains several fields: 'First Name' with an empty text box; 'Time Zone' with a dropdown menu showing '(UTC) Dublin, Edinburgh, Lisbon, London'; and 'Weight Units' with a dropdown menu. Below these is a section titled 'What pronoun do you prefer:' with a dropdown menu. The dropdown menu is open, showing three options: 'He / His', 'She / Her', and 'They / Their'. The 'They / Their' option is selected and highlighted with a blue bar. Below the dropdown menu, there is an example sentence: 'Example: **They** have been tracking **their** weight for 18 weeks.' and a note: 'This sort of text only appears when you share your dashboard with others. See the **Sharing** section below for more details.'

Why it's good:

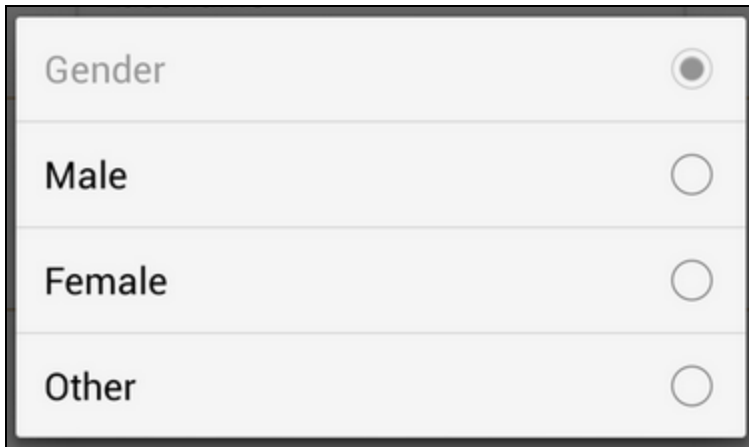
- It asks for what the website needs to know in order to function (pronouns), rather than asking for gender unnecessarily and then assuming a pronoun based on that.
- It's very clear about why it needs to know this information.
- "They" is the default selection, so it has not assumed a gender.
- It gives example sentences, so you know what you're changing on your profile.

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The Bad

Here are some methods to avoid, and some explanations as to why.

A hotel wifi registration form⁴



What it is: A form that people wishing to use a hotel's free wifi must fill in.

Notes: This is a very good example of a form that asks for gender unnecessarily. There is no possible reason that a hotel would need to know someone's gender in order to let them use their wifi. In this situation, the gender question should be removed entirely.

Pros:

- There's a third option for gender.

Cons:

- The question is required.
 - Improvement: Make the question optional.
- The word "other" is alienating.
 - Improvement: A small survey's⁵ results suggest that "other" as an option is more favourably received when accompanied by a text box for users to type in their gender.

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⁴ Tweet by @NonSequitur: <https://twitter.com/Sequaternion/status/620237370676396032>

⁵ "Survey results: UCAS and the "Other" gender option (multiple choice answer wordings)", November 2014. <http://cassolotl.tumblr.com/post/102444078045>

Skype



The image shows a screenshot of the Skype profile creation interface. At the top is a blue header with the white Skype logo. Below the header is a light gray section containing a label 'Gender' on the left and a dropdown menu on the right. The dropdown menu is open, showing a blue header with the text 'Select gender' and two white options: 'Male' and 'Female'.

What it is: A cross-platform online VOIP and IM service. [\[Link\]](#)

Why it's bad:

- There are only two gender options.
 - Improvement: Provide a third gender option, and a “decline to state” option.
- On the plus side one can leave the gender field blank, but that results in an eternal notification that one's profile is incomplete.
 - Improvement: Do not mark a profile as “incomplete” if the gender field is empty, or provide a “decline to state” option.

Notes: None.

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The screenshot shows a survey form with the YouTube logo at the top. Below the logo is a red horizontal bar. The question 'Are you....?' is displayed. There are two radio button options: 'Male' and 'Female'. At the bottom, there is a red button labeled 'NEXT >>'.

This screenshot was taken from a survey by YouTube aimed at creators of YouTube's content.

What it is: A very popular video-sharing website. [\[Link\]](#)

Why it's bad:

- It has only two gender options. This implies that YouTube aren't interested in nonbinary people's views.
 - Improvement: Provide a third gender option, and a "decline to state" option.
- The question is required, forcing nonbinary people to choose an inaccurate gender.
 - Improvement: Make the question optional, and provide a "decline to state" option.
- It was asked right at the end of the survey, meaning that nonbinary respondents must either choose an inaccurate gender or abandon an entire survey that took time to complete and is valuable to YouTube.
 - Improvement: The above two suggestions would prevent this scenario.

Why it's good: They managed to clearly ask for gender identity information without calling it gender or sex, which is more inclusive and advised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.⁶

Notes: YouTube has many nonbinary creators who provide content on the site, thus making money for YouTube. Many of these videos and creators can be found by searching for keywords such as "nonbinary" and "genderqueer", so YouTube can easily find out that there is a significant number of nonbinary people who may want to fill out this form.

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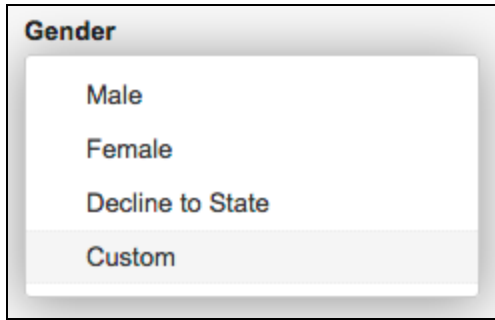
⁶ "Research report 75: Monitoring equality - Developing a gender identity question & Technical note: Measuring gender identity", June 2014:

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/publication/research-report-75-monitoring-equality-developing-a-gender-identity-question-technical-note-measuring-gender-identity>

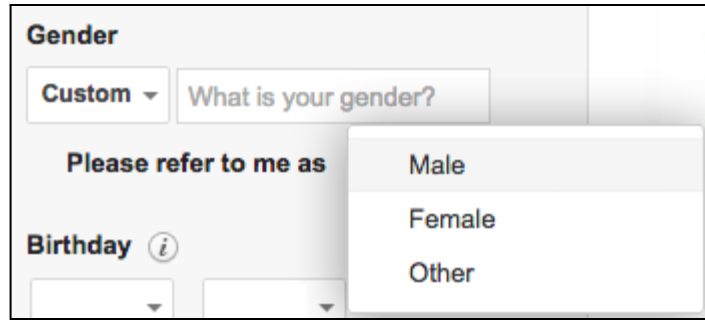
The Shaky Middle Ground

Some people have obviously made an effort and may have done quite well, but leave room for improvement.

Google+



A screenshot of the Google+ profile page's gender selection dropdown menu. The menu is titled "Gender" and contains four options: "Male", "Female", "Decline to State", and "Custom". The "Custom" option is currently selected and highlighted with a light gray background.



A screenshot of the Google+ profile page's gender selection interface. It shows a "Gender" section with a "Custom" dropdown menu and a text input field labeled "What is your gender?". Below this is a "Please refer to me as" section with a dropdown menu that is open, showing options: "Male", "Female", and "Other". To the left of the "Please refer to me as" dropdown is a "Birthday" section with a date picker and an information icon.

What it is: Google's social network. [[Link](#)]

Pros:

- There's a "decline to state" option.
- It provides an open text box to type in your gender label.
- If you choose "custom" it asks which pronouns⁷ you prefer. ("Please refer to me as")

Cons:

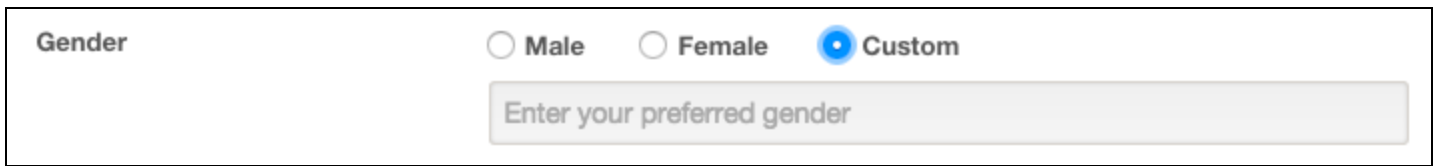
- The pronouns question unnecessarily says that "he/him" are male pronouns and "she/her" are female pronouns, which is not the case for everyone. It also puts people who don't like either of these into an alienating "other" category for "they/them" pronouns.
 - Improvement: Perhaps, "please refer to me as: he / she / they / no pronouns, just use my name" and provide example sentences for clarity. This removes the word "other" and the implication that the pronouns are gendered.

Notes: None.

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⁷ For the purposes of this document, "pronouns" refers to the words we use in place of people's names when referring to them in the third person. The most commonly used are he/him/his/his/himself and she/her/her/hers/herself. The most commonly used among nonbinary people is singular they (they/them/their/theirs/themself).

Pinterest

A screenshot of a gender selection form from Pinterest. The form is titled "Gender" and contains three radio button options: "Male", "Female", and "Custom". The "Custom" option is selected, indicated by a blue dot. Below the radio buttons is a text input field with the placeholder text "Enter your preferred gender".

Gender

☐ Male ☐ Female ☒ Custom

Enter your preferred gender

What it is: A website and app for collecting inspirational pictures [\[link\]](#)

Why it's good: It's got more than two options, and it provides a third option for nonbinary/genderqueer people that doesn't limit one to a particular gender label.

Potential improvements:

- With this design, one cannot deselect gender. It could be improved by providing a way to make the gender field blank again.

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Pronouns

Personal pronouns are the words that we use to refer to people in the third person without using their name. The most commonly used in English are *he* and *she*. We also often use *they* in reference to an individual of unknown or non-specific gender - this use of *they* about one person is called “singular ‘they’”. The gender-neutrality and familiarity of singular ‘they’ to most English-speakers makes it the most commonly accepted personal pronoun for and by nonbinary people, followed by *he* and *she*.⁸

For many trans and nonbinary people, gender is a private and personal matter, but pronouns are not.

Many organisations’ forms ask about gender and even titles just so that people within the organisation can know whether to call someone *he* or *she*. If this is the case for you, I would suggest that you consider asking about pronouns instead of gender.

Should you decide to ask about pronouns, you should include *he*, *she*, and *they*, as well as a “no pronouns” option. It may also be helpful to include a section for brief notes. You should also explain how the information will be used; whether or not pronouns will be publicly viewable online, for example, may affect users’ choices.

The simple version

Pronouns can be gathered like this:

Please refer to me as:

☐ he	(e.g.: he is a customer)
☐ she	(e.g.: she is a customer)
☐ they	(e.g.: they are a customer)
☐ none, avoid pronouns	(e.g.: Sam is a customer)

Notes: _____

This information will only be used by employees to refer to you.

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⁸ “Nonbinary Stats 2015 (Worldwide)”, February 2015: <http://cassolotl.tumblr.com/post/111585517125>

The more involved version

Some nonbinary people are uncomfortable with *he* or *she*, and dislike singular ‘they’ for its plural verbs. For this reason, people have been trying to introduce new standard gender-neutral singular personal pronouns for over a century.⁹ In recent years custom pronouns have become more popular; in a recent survey¹⁰ of just under 3,000 participants, of the 99 pronouns preferred, 61 were entered only once (<2% of total pronouns entered).

Allowing for these uncommon and invented pronouns is more complex when designing a form, because each pronoun set has five cases:¹¹ *subject*, *object*, *possessive adjective*, *possessive noun*, *reflexive*.

subject	object	possessive adjective	possessive noun	reflexive
“___ sneezed.”	“I saw ___.”	“That’s ___ coat.”	“That coat’s ___.”	“[subject] likes ___ self.”
he	him	his	his	himself
she	her	her	hers	herself
they	them	their	theirs	themselves

We need all five forms when learning new pronouns for people so that we can talk about them smoothly in the third person. When presenting pronouns as a set they are typically separated with a forward slash, like this:

he/him/his/his/himself

A list of invented pronouns and their five cases can be found in a table on Wikipedia [here](#). One of the more common and longest-lasting new personal pronouns is known as *ze/hir*,¹² and would fit into the table like this:

subject	object	possessive adjective	possessive noun	reflexive
“___ sneezed.”	“I saw ___.”	“That’s ___ coat.”	“That coat’s ___.”	“[subject] likes ___ self.”
ze (zie, se)	hir	hir	hirs	hirsself

Note: Pronouns in English are a ‘closed class’, which means it is more difficult to learn new words in that class compared to an ‘open’ class such as nouns or verbs. Consider words like *blog*, *jeggings*, and *twerk*; we pick up

⁹ “The Gender-Neutral Pronoun: 150 Years Later, Still an Epic Fail”, August 2010:

<http://blog.oup.com/2010/08/gender-neutral-pronoun/>

¹⁰ “Nonbinary Stats 2015 (Worldwide)”, February 2015: <http://cassolotl.tumblr.com/post/111585517125>

¹¹ “The Non-Binary Person’s Guide to Invented Pronouns”: <http://anagnori.tumblr.com/post/75752291700>

¹² The ze/hir pronoun has existed in various forms since at least 1972:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_War_Blues#Contents

and create new nouns and verbs constantly, but the last time we got a new personal pronoun in English was before English was written down.

When asking people for information about pronouns that are not in common usage, you will need to ask for all five cases in order to talk about people correctly. Most people will struggle if you ask them for *subject/object/possessive adjective/possessive noun/reflexive*, but will find it easier if example sentences are provided.

Consider:

Please refer to me as:

- ☐ he
- ☐ she
- ☐ they
- ☐ no pronouns, just my name
- ☐ something else:

_____ ["**He** sneezed"]
_____ ["I saw **him**"]
_____ ["That's **his** coat"]
_____ ["That coat is **his**"]
_____ ["He likes **himself**"]

Notes: _____ [E.g.: "Anything except 'it' or 'he'."]

These will appear on the website in references to you, many of which will be publicly viewable to strangers, e.g.: on your public profile.

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