

Understanding Gender Pronouns

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What is a pronoun?

- A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (like I or you) or someone or something that is being talked about (like she, it, them, and this). Gender pronouns (like he and hers) specifically refer to people that you are talking about.

What is a gender pronoun?

- A gender pronoun is the pronoun that a person chooses to use for themselves.
 - For example: If Xena's gender pronouns are *she*, *her*, and *hers*, you could say "Xena ate *her* food because *she* was hungry."

What are some commonly used pronouns?

- ***She, her, hers***, and ***he, him, his*** are common and more familiar pronouns. Some people call these "female/feminine" and "male/masculine" pronouns, but many avoid these labels because, for example, not everyone who uses *he* feels like a "male" or "masculine".
- There are lots of gender-neutral pronouns in use. Here are a few you might hear:
 - ***They, them, theirs*** (Xena ate *their* food because *they* were hungry.) This is a fairly common gender-neutral pronoun...and yes, it can in fact be used in the singular.
 - ***Ze, hir*** (Xena ate *hir* food because *ze* was hungry.) *Ze* is pronounced like "zee" and can also be spelled *zie* or *xe* and replaces *she/he/they*. *Hir* is pronounced like "here" and replaces *her/hers/him/his/they/theirs*.
- ***Just say my name please!*** (Xena ate *Xena's* food because *Xena* was hungry.) Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all, and would rather use their name as a pronoun instead.

Never, ever refer to a person as "it" or "he-she" (unless they specifically ask you to).

These are offensive slurs used against trans, genderqueer, non-binary, and genderfluid individuals.

Why is it important to respect people's pronouns?

- You can't always know what someone's pronouns are by looking at them.
- Asking and correctly using someone's pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show respect for their gender identity.
- When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above).

- It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else's gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful but also oppressive.

Why is it really important to respect students' pronouns?

- Asking students for their pronouns and consistently using them correctly can determine within the first few minutes if they will feel respected at Augusta University or not.
- You will be setting an example for students. If you are consistent about using someone's pronouns, other students will follow your example.
- Many students will be learning about pronouns for the first time, so this will be a learning opportunity for them that they will keep forever.
- Discussing and correctly using pronouns sets a tone of respect and allyship that trans, genderqueer, non-binary, and genderfluid individuals do not take for granted. It can truly make all of the difference, especially for incoming first-year students that may feel particularly vulnerable, lonely, and scared.

How do I ask someone what their pronouns are?

- **Try asking** "What pronouns do you use?" or "What are your pronouns?" or "Which pronouns do you like to hear?" or "Can you remind me which pronouns you use?" It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as getting it wrong or making a hurtful assumption.
- If you are asking a part of an **introduction exercise** and you want to quickly explain what a pronoun is, you could try something like this: "Tell us your name, class year, pronouns (if you feel comfortable and if your pronouns change this semester at any point for any reason I hope you will let us know*) and a fun fact about yourself. I'll start. My name is Xena, I'm class of 2041, I use she/her/hers, and I have been to the moon."

**Including the caveat "if you feel comfortable" allows students to choose whether or not they would like to share their pronouns. Not everyone feels comfortable sharing their pronouns in this way. Additionally, adding a fun fact, or some other piece of information, after asking someone for their pronouns is an important part of an introduction exercise because it allows the attention to be taken away from whether the individual stated their pronouns or not.*

What if I make a mistake?

- It's okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like "Sorry, I meant *she*." If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize briefly in private and move on.
- A lot of time it can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right, but *please don't! It is inappropriate and makes the person who was misgendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you, which is absolutely not their job. It is your job to remember people's pronouns.*

Are "sex" and "gender" different things?

- Yes! Sex and gender are often used as synonyms, but they are different!
- Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as female or male. These sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, but these characteristics tend to differentiate humans as females or males.
- Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.

Taking an active role

- You may hear students using the wrong pronouns for someone. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been misgendered. This means saying something like “Actually, Xena prefers the pronoun she”, then moving on. *If other students or faculty, administrators, or staff are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it!*
- It may be appropriate to approach them and say something like “I noticed that you were getting referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your pronouns? I want to make sure this space is a safe space for you.” or simply, “Is it okay if I correct others on your pronouns?” Follow up if necessary, but *take your cues from the comfort level of the student*. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.