

Pronoun tips from binary men and women

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<https://cassolotl.tumblr.com/post/168336693365>

Every once in a while I am asked (or see someone asking) how to use pronouns other than he/him and she/her. The person asking is usually a man or a woman unfamiliar with nonbinary stuff generally, but they've got a particular nonbinary person in their life whom they care about and they don't want to mess up. Maybe they keep misgendering their nonbinary friend and they feel guilty, or they want to take the burden off the nonbinary person who keeps having to correct them, something like that.

When binary people lack that confidence with pronouns, they seek the advice of nonbinary people. Not only are we likely to give advice that's not ideal for binary people (because we've got skin in the game, all our friends are nonbinary so we're used to it, etc.), but it is another facet of that dynamic of the privileged group (in this case binary people) placing their burden onto the marginalised group. **Binary people should be asking advice from other binary people who've mastered pronouns.**

So, I asked, and a bunch of binary people answered. I got advice from trans and cis binary people (men and women), and I'm collecting all the common stuff and the stuff I thought was good, all here for your perusal. If you know a binary person who's struggling to get pronouns right, pass this along.

[This article assumes that you know a specific nonbinary person and you want to get better at using their pronouns, though the advice can be adapted. It also assumes that you're familiar with the concepts of singular they and neopronouns, and you accept that they're grammatically correct.]

PRACTISE

Something that came up over and over, from cis and trans people, was that just like learning anything language-related, practise is essential. And like anything language-related, it is definitely possible to learn!

"If you can get into a hobby like, say, knitting, and learn how to use 'knit' vs 'purl' vs 'cast' vs 'bind' and so on, you can absolutely learn whichever pronouns are correct for the people you talk to, or about and use them as needed." –*An anonymous cisgender binary person.*

- **Practise a little bit every day.** Language is maintained through regular and habitual use. "Pure repetition leaves these pronouns on the tip on my tongue." –*Anonymous cisgender binary person*
- **Talk about the person and use the correct pronouns.** You can talk about them to yourself or to a non-judgemental friend. Do this while they're not around, so they don't feel

uncomfortable. “It really helped me having a friend [to practise with] who I trusted to not judge me when I got it wrong.” –*An anonymous cisgender binary person*

- **Think about the person and use their pronouns.** “I would narrate what they were doing in my head using their name and chosen pronouns, so like. ‘They sat down and opened their textbook for the class.’” –*Mason*
- **Write about someone and use the pronouns you want to learn.** Something magical about writing fixes things in our memories. Write about the person whose pronouns you’re trying to learn, or write a story about a fictional person with those pronouns. Compose a selection of phrases that use all five forms of the pronoun, and write them down. Rewrite a passage of a book you’re reading with different pronouns. “Every time you bugger up someone’s pronouns, write a paragraph about them in your journal as practice - just, like, nice things about them - and do make it about focusing on them and who they are, not at all about your mistake or punishing yourself for it.” –*Anna K*
- **Listen to/read works by other people using the pronouns.** Podcasts, YouTube, fiction and non-fiction books, newspaper articles, queer socials where folks have a lot of nonbinary friends...
- **“Practice getting it wrong as well as getting it right,** so that you can correct yourself smoothly and automatically.” –*Anna K*

TRICK YOURSELF

- **“Imagine your friend has a tiny buddy on them,** like a puppet in their pocket, and you’re talking about your singular friend and their buddy, so: ‘them’. Eventually you’ll get used to saying they/them/their.” –*An anonymous cisgender binary person.*
- **Draw on your prior experience.** If you’re queer and you’ve had to do the Pronoun Dance when talking about your partners before, pretend to yourself that you’re deliberately hiding someone’s gender from the person you’re talking to. If you’re used to not knowing friends’ genders because you only know them online, pretend to yourself that you’ve never met your nonbinary friend AFK before. “The most effective way I can get myself in the mental frame to consistently use they/them pronouns for someone who I’ve previously known as she/her or he/him, is by thinking of it as like I don’t wish to disclose this person’s gender to the audience (even if the audience is myself, in my thoughts).” –*S*

Many people commented that tricking yourself often naturally and accidentally leads to...

CHANGE HOW YOU THINK ABOUT GENDER

“View the people you’re talking about as people, and their gender(s) as valid. This is the most helpful thing.” –*Kaelen*

- **Start using singular they when talking about people whose genders you don’t know.** This was recommended by a LOT of binary people. It cements the idea that you can’t know someone’s gender or pronouns unless they’ve told you, and it detaches pronouns from gender presentation and your own assumptions based on appearance.
- **Research genders that defy the binary.** Get comfortable with the subject, understand that what people tell you about themselves is important and personal to them, and accept that any gender that someone earnestly tells you they experience is valid.
- **Get used to the idea that you don’t know anyone’s gender until they tell you.** “If I knew Shirley used they/them pronouns, I might slip and say ‘she is over there’ but if I train myself to believe I am not fully aware of their gender (only they are!) than I can say ‘they are over there’ more confidently and assured.” –*Maria*
- **Think of people as masculine and feminine instead of male and female.** “Something that I’m sure also helps is seeing certain looks/types not as “male/female” but as fem/masc. There can be a masc female, a fem male, and so on and so forth.” –*An anonymous nonbinary trans-masc person.*

IN THE MEAN TIME

- **If you’re struggling, use the person’s name in a pinch.** It’s better than misgendering them, and it can keep the natural flow of conversation going so that it’s not all about their pronouns.
- **When you mess up, correct yourself and move on.** “I think I’m a lot less likely to make the same mistake again if I catch myself and amend it.” –*helen*
- **Don’t say sorry, say thank you.** “If you misgendered someone and are corrected pls say “thank you” rather than “I’m sorry” - apology forces that person to tell you it’s ok, which is strange. THANK YOU suggests that u understand it’s not okay and you’re grateful to have been corrected!” --*Dan Owens on Twitter*¹

¹ <https://twitter.com/danowensmgmt/status/1180950652320669697>

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

- **Accept that you'll make mistakes and that's okay.** "There is no fast, there's no short cut for it except making sure you do it regularly, and correcting yourself when you inevitably get it wrong. It isn't actually a huge deal, most non-binary people recognise the difference between a slip up (particularly if you knew the person pre-coming out) and wilful misgendering." –*CJ Atkinson*
- **Privately say/think kind things to yourself when you get it right.** Learning new pronouns can be really hard and positive reinforcement is good for you!
- **Forgive yourself when you get it wrong.** Don't beat yourself up, because everyone gets it wrong sometimes and you can't learn if you don't make mistakes. "Don't punish yourself for slipping up. As long as you're trying you're good." –*An anonymous trans binary person.*
- **Start easy and work up.** "When it comes to neopronouns they become easier to use after learning they/them because you've already got a base to work off of, if you will." –*An anonymous nonbinary trans-masc person.*

DON'T PUT IT ON THEM

- **It's your responsibility.** If you're reading this then you probably already know this! No one should have to work to have their identity recognised and respected, no matter how uncommon their pronouns are. "Not putting the onus of correction on the person I've misgendered has been key for me." –*helen*
- **Don't ask a nonbinary person to correct you.** It is exhausting and depressing to have to correct other people on your pronouns all the time. If you need someone to correct you, ask your binary friends to correct you and each other, whether the nonbinary person is within earshot or not.
- **Don't talk to them about how hard their pronouns are.** Nonbinary people have to deal with a steady stream of "I'm really sorry, I am trying but it's just so hard." We know it's hard for some people and we get it, but we also know that it is possible and quite frankly, as the people in the middle ring of the Kvetching Order² we're not the ones you should be complaining to.

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/promoting-hope-preventing-suicide/201705/ring-theory-helps-us-b-ring-comfort-in>