

Why pronouns are important

Pronouns, also known as “I”, “they”, “she”, “he”, “we”, “hers” and many others, are a part of our daily language. Pronouns are used as a way to identify or refer to someone.

This makes them very important because they are the smallest way to acknowledge someone’s identity. There are lots of articles and discussions on social media as to whether or not pronouns are important, so let’s set the record straight: they really are!

Pronouns are extremely personal. Using them correctly shows respect for the person we’re talking to — pronouns are a way that we identify with the world, and they move with us throughout our lives.

Most people have the privilege not to worry about others misusing their pronouns. Taking that privilege for granted and failing to use someone’s correct pronoun is not only disrespectful and hurtful but can also lead to that person feeling alienated.

It is important to respect pronouns as it validates a person’s identity, and you shouldn’t assume someone’s pronoun. Remember to ask about pronouns when you meet someone or introduce yourself using your pronouns to let others know what your pronouns are.

Respecting people’s pronouns is the vital first step in creating an inclusive environment.

What are gender neutral pronouns?

Gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns are unspecific to one gender.

This is especially important for people who don’t identify with their assigned gender at birth. Rather than assume someone’s pronouns based on their appearance, it’s crucial to ask them what their pronouns are. Using pronouns creates safer and more inclusive spaces for people to be themselves, knowing that other people are going to respect their identity.

An example of gender neutral pronouns is the use of “they”. Instead of saying “he’s going home”, one would say “they’re going home”. “Jesse is in the same team as me, so I’ll work with them”. Here we can see that Jesse is not associated with a particular gender. Jesse’s pronouns are they / them / theirs.

Make respectful pronoun communication a regular habit, it really isn’t anything new, Chaucer and Shakespeare used “they” as a singular pronoun. Jane Austen used it 75 times in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Non-binary people

Many people don’t feel comfortable thinking of themselves as simply male or female. Their gender identity is more complicated. Some may identify as right in the middle between male and female.

Others may feel mainly male, but not 100% male (or vice versa, not 100% female). Increasing numbers of people are identifying as non-binary or gender queer.

UK law currently only recognises two genders – male and female (though in 2016, the Westminster Parliament's women and equalities committee recommended that this change. This is something that we continue to campaign for. Good practice usually goes beyond existing law and it is good practice to acknowledge and include non-binary identities.

Non-binary people may change their name, title and the pronoun used to describe them. Mx is a non-gendered title (like Dr, Prof or Rev) and is increasingly provided for as an option on data systems, including UNISON membership records and the DVLA.

It is increasingly common for groups to ask everyone to give their pronoun when they introduce themselves, along with their name. This avoids singling anyone out. Many non-binary people use the pronoun 'they'. It may take time to get used to non-gendered pronouns but it is important to respect people's gender identity.

More inclusive

As we mentioned earlier, Chaucer, Shakespeare and Jane Austen all used "they" when writing their books. We wouldn't suggest that our writing ability is anywhere as good as theirs, but we could like to suggest that you replace:

- He/she with they or them
- His/hers with their
- Ladies & Gentlemen with colleagues / friends

Trade unions have already started to change their language – we no longer say branch chairman, having replaced that with branch chair. A more inclusive way to address conference would be to replace Brothers/Sisters with delegates or comrades.

And if you are fortunate enough to chair a conference, instead of calling the man in the red shirt, you could call for the delegate or comrade in the red shirt. Just changing a few words will make UNISON non-binary members feel more included in the union.

In UNISON non-binary members organise with LGBT+ members

To find out more, visit our webpages – www.unison.org.uk/out Ring UNISONdirect 0800 0857 857

Email out@unison.co.uk Follow us on social media @unisonlgbt+

Write to Susan Mawhood, national officer – LGBT+ equality, UNISON Centre, 130 Euston Road, London, NW1 2AY