



# Small Words; Big Difference

## What are pronouns?

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns. Simply put, we use personal pronouns to speak about someone when they are not around or often in place of their name.

*For example: Alex went to the cafe and **she** bought a coffee - 'She' is the personal pronoun in use.*

We all use pronouns for ourselves and others, and these little words can indicate a lot about a person's identity. Some people don't give their pronouns much thought at all, while for others, pronouns can be a really important part of affirming one's gender identity and expressing themselves to the world. Everyone gets to choose their own pronouns and to decide how they want to be referred to by others.

When you use a trans or gender diverse person's correct pronouns, you are saying that you respect them and their identity. Using incorrect pronouns can be extremely harmful and hurtful, and shows a disregard for a person's identity and experience. It's okay to take some time to get used to a person's pronouns, but it's important that you make the effort to get them right.

When teachers didn't model appropriate behavior 64% of trans and gender diverse students experienced deliberate use of incorrect pronouns at school compared to only 30% when teachers did model appropriate behaviour<sup>1</sup>.



1. Smith, U.M., Jones, T., Ward, R., Dixon, J., Mitchell, A., & Hillier, L. (2014). From Blues to Rainbows: Mental health and wellbeing of gender diverse and transgendered young people in Australia. Melbourne: The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society



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The most common pronouns used in WA are:

**She/Her/Hers:** Typically used by girls, women, or anyone else who would like these pronouns used for **herself**, regardless of **her** gender history.

**He/Him/His:** Typically used by boys, men, or anyone else who would like these pronouns used for **himself**, regardless of **his** gender history.

**They/them/theirs:** Typically gender neutral and used by people who are not exclusively male or female or anyone who would like these pronouns used for **them**, regardless of **their** gender history.

### Practice Using Pronouns

1. \_\_\_\_\_ really love/s to play soccer.
2. The backpack belongs to \_\_\_\_\_.
3. I got some help on a math question from \_\_\_\_\_ yesterday.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ classroom is upstairs.
5. That lunch bag is \_\_\_\_\_, not mine.
6. Alex got the top class score all by \_\_\_\_\_.

Answers: 1. she/he/they (subject), 2. him/her/them (object), 3. him/her/them (object), 4. his/her/their (possessive), 5. his/hers/theirs (possessive), 6. himself/herself/themself (reflexive)

### Staying Educated

There are more than just these pronouns out there, depending on geographical location, language, culture, and someone's identity. If you want more practice or to know more about pronouns, you can go to [www.minus18.org.au/pronouns-app](http://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns-app)



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## Key tips for being a good ally

### Respect the individual as the expert

Pronouns are different for each person. One non-binary person may use different pronouns to another non-binary person and that is fine. A woman or man may use they/them/theirs because it fits better and that's fine too. Being an ally is all about respecting the individual as the expert and helping them to reinforce their pronouns to others.

### Invite others to use their pronouns

Introducing yourself with your pronouns can be a great way to show that you're an ally and invite others to do the same. You can include your pronouns on your name badge, email signature, classroom whiteboard, office door, and anywhere else that you might introduce yourself.

### When you make a mistake

Humans make mistakes, so don't let this deter you from making the effort. It's important that when you do make a mistake that you address your mistake as quickly as possible and then move on with the conversation. The conversation may go something like this:

*"Ashley came to me in my office the other day to ask about how we can organize a cake sale for Wear It Purple Day next year. **He** was hoping.... Sorry, **they** were hoping to get a group of students involved and raise money for LGBTI Mental health".*

Additionally, if you hear someone else make this mistake and not correct themselves, quickly and politely correct them, and move on "Sorry, Ashley uses they/them/their pronouns" or simply, "They, not he". This is a big part of being an LGBTI+ ally!

If you are really finding new pronouns tricky, you can replace the pronoun with the person's name. But it is very important to keep trying and to know that sometimes trying to get pronouns right is better than not using them at all.

### Forms and Documentation

You can ensure that your school respects all students' and staff pronouns in forms and documentation by providing a space for them to tell you theirs. That way you can be prepared for reporting and any formal communication that may arise.



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## Common Questions

*“But isn’t using they/them/theirs grammatically incorrect?”*

No. Usage of ‘singular they’ dates back to as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century- even Shakespeare used it! We often already use singular gender neutral pronouns for people when we do not know their gender. In fact, you might actually find that you do it without thinking:

*“Someone left **their** jumper behind today, I hope **they** come back for it”,*

*- Or,*

*“I love it when a teacher introduces **themselves** with **their** pronouns”*

*“Do you need guardian permission to use a student’s pronouns?”*

Similar to respecting and using any student’s preferred name or nickname, pronouns are used for social purposes and students are not required to undergo a formal process or parental consent in order to have their pronouns respected by others. It could be useful however, to check-in with the student and see if their parents are aware/supportive so that you are not ‘outing’ the student by using their pronouns around their parents.

*“What if they change their mind?”*

Thankfully pronouns are not set in stone. Understanding one’s own gender can be tricky at times and may take time. Some people may go through a period of using a new set of pronouns but later find it still doesn’t fit quite right for them and try something else and that is ok. Remember, being a good ally is all about respecting the individual as the expert of their own gender and pronouns.

*“I can’t keep up, it’s always changing, and I have better things to worry about”*

If you model this behavior in your school, you are likely to contribute to an inclusive culture for staff and students, and gain trust and respect from the individual whose pronouns you are using. You also help to ensure that all students have access to equitable education where they feel respected and valued.

One WA school student put it this way:

*“If you can learn and teach a changing curriculum every year, you can learn and use my pronouns”*