

# The DEI Committee's Guide to Personal Pronouns

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Like many scientific fields of study, fisheries science and research has long suffered from a lack of diversity in its ranks. In a profession dominated by straight white men, attending professional meetings and conferences can be an intimidating experience for those who fall into historically excluded groups. In the interest of promoting a more inclusive culture at FLAFS meetings and in our workplaces, the FLAFS DEI Committee will be publishing quarterly articles in the Shellcracker to address “hot topics” surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion in the scientific community. This issue’s article will cover a subject that has gotten a great deal of attention in recent years – personal pronouns.

Do you have a friend, colleague, or family member who goes by their middle name or a nickname instead of their first name? What would you think of someone who insisted on calling this person by the name on their birth certificate no matter how much they hated it or how uncomfortable it made them? At best, this behavior (when intentional) is obnoxious, and at worst, it can be insulting and cruel. Outside of our names, pronouns are how we identify ourselves and how others refer to us. Much like using someone’s preferred name or pronouncing their name correctly, using someone’s correct personal **pronouns** is a polite, respectful, and professional way to show that you care about them and accept them. In other words, **it’s just good manners!**

Despite our best intentions, a lot of us are fairly new to the idea of **gender identity** and personal pronouns. Sometimes things can get downright confusing. This guide is intended to help clarify and address some common questions surrounding gender identity and the use of personal pronouns, so that those of us who are **cisgender** can ensure that we are fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment within fisheries, not only at professional conferences and meetings, but also in offices, labs, and in the field. If you see some terms that are unfamiliar to you, check out the definitions in the sidebar for more information.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Cisgender:** a person whose gender identity and expression are aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth

**Gender:** a set of cultural identities, expressions, and roles. Gender is often assigned at birth based on anatomy, but, because it is a social construct, it is possible to reject or modify the gender one is assigned at birth and live and express a gender that feels truer to oneself

**Gender expression:** the multiple ways in which a person may communicate gender to oneself and others (e.g., behavior, dress)

**Gender identity:** a personal conception of oneself as male, female, both, neither, and/or another gender. It is a matter of self-identification – no one can tell another person how to identify or what terms to use.

## What are personal pronouns? Why should I use them?

Personal pronouns are the words we use for ourselves and others in place of proper names. In English, we have both gendered pronouns, such as “she”, “him”, “her”, and “his”, and **gender-neutral** pronouns, such as “they” and “them”. Some newer gender-neutral pronouns (sometimes called **neopronouns**), such as “ze” (pronounced ZEE) and “hir” (pronounced HEER), may be less familiar to us. **For more information about neopronouns, check out some of the helpful online guides listed in the *Helpful References* section below.** People may use specific pronouns (e.g., “he/him” or “they/them”), multiple pronouns (e.g., “she/they”), or no pronouns at all. It’s important to understand that **anyone can use any pronouns** regardless of their outward appearance or gender assigned at birth.

Most of us are accustomed to using gendered pronouns, such as “she/her” and “he/him”. To use gendered pronouns correctly, however, we need to know someone’s gender. When we’re talking about family and close friends, this usually isn’t a problem. But with people less familiar to us, we tend to make assumptions about gender based on clothing, physical appearance, body hair, or voice. These assumptions are not always correct and can lead to misgendering, which, intentional or not, can be hurtful. **Gender expression** and identity are highly individual. **There is no “right way” to talk, dress, or act based on gender.** The only way to know someone’s gender or their correct pronouns is for them to tell you, which brings us to the next point...

## Should I ask for someone’s pronouns?

The best way to find out what someone else’s pronouns are is to share your own. It’s good practice to introduce yourself with your name and your pronouns. At meeting introductions, you might say, “I’m Susanna. I use she/her pronouns. I’m a freshwater fisheries biologist with FWRI working in the St. Johns River basin.” In more casual settings, this may look something like, “Hi, I’m Susanna and I use she/her pronouns. And you are?” Even if you are cisgender and have never experienced misgendering, **sharing your pronouns invites others to share theirs and reminds everyone around you not to make assumptions.** Adding your pronouns to your email signature and social media bios are also great ways to encourage and normalize pronoun sharing. This practice in online settings can also help us use the correct pronouns for people with

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CTD.)

**Gender-neutral pronouns:** pronouns that do not imply gender (includes they/them)

**Neopronouns:** a category of new pronouns that provide options to reflect gender identity more accurately than conventional pronouns

**Nonbinary:** refers to gender identities used by people whose gender is not exclusively male or female

**Pronouns:** a set of words that can stand in a sentence in place of a person’s name.

**Sexual orientation:** the physical, romantic, or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or other genders. *Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity*

**Transgender:** a person whose gender identity and expression differs from the sex assigned at birth

For a full list of neopronouns, please see the *Helpful References*

names that are less common, gender ambiguous, or from cultures that we are not familiar with. While it may be awkward at first, with practice, we can all get used to sharing our own pronouns and learning and using the correct pronouns for the people around us.

## Using gender-neutral language

Sometimes, circumstances prevent us from learning someone's pronouns before we need to refer to them. In this case, using gender-neutral "they/them" pronouns is the safest choice. Some of us struggle with using "they" as a singular pronoun. However, many of us already do this unconsciously when talking about someone whose gender we do not know. For example, if you sit down at a restaurant and find someone else's cell phone at your table, you might tell waitstaff, "Someone left their phone on the table." If you've rigidly stuck to using "he or she" in place of "they" in your writing and speech, consider this - **language evolves over time**. The singular "they" has been accepted by many authorities on grammar and language, such as the [APA Style Guide](#), the [MLA Handbook](#), the [Oxford English Dictionary](#), and [Merriam-Webster](#).

When addressing groups of people, such as in a meeting or at the start of a presentation, it's best to avoid saying things like "ladies and gentlemen" and instead use gender-neutral terms, such as "folks", "friends", "everyone", or (our personal favorite) "y'all". This acknowledges that not everyone fits into binary "male" or "female" categories and helps us to avoid making assumptions about gender.

## What if I make a mistake?

**Mistakes will be made, and that's okay!** We've all misspoken or mispronounced someone's name at some point, and this is no different. What's important is that we acknowledge and correct our mistakes. If you slip up and use the wrong pronoun, simply say, "Oh, I'm sorry," correct yourself, and proceed with whatever you were talking about. Similarly, if you hear someone around you make a mistake, offer a gentle correction (e.g., "Sorry to interrupt, but Jamie uses they/them pronouns") and let the speaker carry on with what they were saying. If someone corrects you in this manner, don't get defensive or try to make an excuse – just thank them, make the correction, and move on. The simple act of apologizing or correcting someone else's mistake shows that you care and that you're not being intentionally hurtful. When correcting someone else's mistake, pick your moment wisely. For example, it may not be appropriate to interrupt a presentation to clarify a pronoun, and that sort of assistance may actually cause the person more discomfort than the pronoun by making them the center of unwanted attention. In those situations, you may want to have the conversation one-on-one after the presentation or meeting.

## Do you have a question for the DEI committee?

Fill out our [anonymous comment form](#) and we will try to address common questions and concerns about diversity-related topics in a future Shellcracker article.

## Helpful References

Pronouns and gender identity are big topics with a lot of nuances that can't be fully covered in a short article. Please check out the references below for more detailed information:

## **General discussion**

<https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq>

[https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/GLSEN\\_Pronoun\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/GLSEN_Pronoun_Guide.pdf)

<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/GLSEN%20Pronouns%20Resource.pdf>

## **Gender neutral language and neopronouns**

<https://intercultural.uncg.edu/wp-content/uploads/Neopronouns-Explained-UNCG-Intercultural-Engagement.pdf>

<https://diversity.cornell.edu/our-community/staff-resources/lgbtq-staff-faculty/gender-inclusive-pronouns>

<https://www.unf.edu/lgbtqcenter/Pronouns.aspx>

[https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender\\_neutral\\_language](https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender_neutral_language)

## **Sharing pronouns**

<https://pronouns.org/sharing>

<https://gladstone.org/news/how-talking-about-personal-pronouns-can-build-more-inclusive-environment>

<https://hbr.org/2021/09/how-to-talk-about-pronouns-at-work-a-visual-guide>