



# It's 2022: Time to start calling people by their correct pronouns

Steven Petrow

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*Correction & clarification: A prior version of this column misspelled the name of Dee Tum-Monge of the National LGBTQ Task Force.*

Today a good number of emails end with the sender's name and contact info, with an additional line for pronouns. They come from work and personal emails alike. I've also noticed that younger folks are increasingly introducing themselves by saying, "Hi, My name is \_\_ and my pronouns are they/them."

The use of the singular "they" as a pronoun, what was once unfamiliar – and I thought grammatically incorrect – has become almost commonplace in my daily life. I laugh at myself because, when it comes to language, I had long considered myself a traditionalist, which is to say: No split infinitives. No series without the Oxford comma. That would have included not using a plural pronoun for a single person. At the same time, I've tried to respect people by referring to them using "they." When a friend gets married and changes their last name, I'll start calling them by their new surname. When a colleague announces they're transgender, I'm ready to do my level best and begin using their new name and pronouns. In each case, we're talking about identity and respect, which trumps grammar.

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(Actually in 2019, [Merriam-Webster](#) added a new meaning to the four-letter pronoun. "They is taking on a new use ... as a pronoun of choice for someone who doesn't identify as either male or female." So, let's strike the grammar objection.)

## 'My pronouns (tell) you how I exist in this world'

I've spoken to several people who use “they” as their personal pronoun, asking them to explain why such a small word matters so much. [Dee Tum-Monge](#), who works at the National LGBTQ Task Force, told me, “When I first meet someone I usually tell them my pronouns are 'they/them' in English or ‘elle’ in Spanish. I don’t do it to force you to speak differently from what you might be used to. I tell you my pronouns because I am telling you how I exist in this world. Simply, I don’t want you to ascribe or assume my gender by ... using gender-based pronouns.”

Over and over, Tom-Munge has had to explain why they changed both their name and pronouns along with their gender identity: “As if I had to validate that I truly was nonbinary.”

No one should have to validate their identity to anyone.

Emails, nametags, even in-person introductions, are increasingly including a space for people to note their preferred pronouns.

Genny Beemyn, director of the [Stonewall Center](#) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, uses “they” in order to “educate other people that gender is not a binary and not everyone identifies as she or he.” In fact, Beemyn is relying on language to redefine who they are and how we should know them. Language has evolved as has our understanding of gender, which some [experts say](#) is more complex than just male or female.

“When people forget or mistakenly assume my pronouns, I typically correct them,” they explained. But Beemyn finds that they’re regularly “misgendered by customer service people who think they’re being polite by using ‘sir’ or ‘mister.’” Instead, they said, “I just curse under my breath and don’t say anything because I do not (want) to be constantly challenging people.”

This kind of heavy lifting – or shifting – can be helped by friends and family. Phoenix Lindsey-Hall, who works at an arts nonprofit in Brooklyn, told me, “I have allies that are really crucial and critical to me identifying as they/them and being known that way in the world.” When you think about it, if someone’s referring to you, you may not be in the room, which is why it’s important for

others to remind people of an individual's pronouns. For instance, Lindsey-Hall suggests a friend make a correction like, "Oh, actually they use they/them pronouns."

Tom-Munge told me that if someone is being resistant or intentionally harmful in using the wrong pronouns, it's much harder to address. First, they consider the safety of the situation because [violence against transgender and nonbinary](#) individuals continues to increase at an [alarming rate](#). If not threatened, they might be more confrontational, explaining, "I don't answer by my birth name or wrong pronouns." They'll also refer people to a very useful website called [mypronouns.org](#).

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Let's face it. Language evolves. Some of us remember – or have read about – how hotly debated "[Ms.](#)" was five decades ago. A woman who demanded that she not be identified by her marital status was considered radical at the time. But soon it became clear: A woman could choose Miss, Mrs. or Ms. – and we should call her what she wanted to be called. If someone updated her choice, we followed suit.

We do it all the time – which is what I once told a friend who said it was disrespectful of Caitlyn Jenner to force us to use her new name and pronouns. I reminded my friend that when she got married, she changed her last name to her husband's. And that's the name all of us use now, not only because it's her legal name, but also because it's respectful. Like many women a half-century ago, nonbinary individuals today are asserting their own power to name themselves.

I am also reminded that people evolve, too, and not always at the same pace as political or linguistic movements. I know it's difficult for some to accept the notion of gender being on a spectrum or even a matrix, but let's remember we can accept people and respect their identities without fully understanding. That's called empathy.

### **Proper pronoun etiquette**

**Q: How do I let others know what my pronouns are?**

**A:** Dee Tum-Monge told me they would say: “Hi!, my name is Dee, and I use they/them pronouns.” You could also include your pronouns in your email signature, which is what more and more people are doing, regardless of their gender. It’s a thing.

**Q:** Is it OK to ask a new acquaintance personal questions about their pronoun choice?

**A:** Asking someone this question at work or school, even among friends, can be risky. You don’t want to ask someone to out themselves, especially if in an unwelcoming or unsafe environment.

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**Q:** What do you do if you meet a new friend/co-worker and don’t know what pronoun to use?

**A:** Listen to how they identify, which might be in how they introduce themselves. Or, introduce yourself first, including your pronouns, so that others may follow suit, safely. If in private, you can ask, “What are your pronouns, if you don’t mind sharing?” But be prepared to adopt them and use them correctly.

**Q:** What do you do if you misgender someone?

**A:** Correct yourself, or ask for clarification, as soon as you realize the error. Go beyond apologizing – try harder to get it right the next time.

**Q:** If someone doesn’t use your correct pronouns, what can you do?

**A:** Start by reminding people: “Oh, you might have forgotten my pronouns are they/them.” Ask your friends to reinforce your pronoun usage. Finally, suggest [mypronouns.org](http://mypronouns.org) as a valuable resource.

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