**https://www.teenvogue.com/story/they-them-questions-answered**

**They/Them Pronouns: All Your Questions About  Gender Neutral Pronouns Answered**

From the history of gender neutral pronouns (they aren’t new!) to what to do if you mess it up.

**BY**[**DESMOND MEAGLEY**](https://www.teenvogue.com/contributor/desmond-meagley)**AND**[**YOUTH RADIO**](https://www.teenvogue.com/contributor/youth-radio)

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LYDIA ORTIZ

People say the darndest things about they/them pronouns.

When I tell someone that my [pronouns](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/gender-pronouns) are they/them/their, I never know what to expect. Sometimes people say okay and move on, but other times, they’ll start to ask a whole bunch of questions that I don’t really feel like answering. It’s usually well intentioned; I get that people are just trying to understand. But I do get tired of explaining the same things about gender neutral pronouns over and over.

So to save everyone (myself included) some time and confusion, I’ve rounded up some responses to the most common questions — including a few of the frankly weirdest ones — that I get about my pronouns as a [nonbinary](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-it-means-to-be-non-binary) person. We’ll also spend a little time unpacking what gender neutral and non-gender pronouns mean more generally.

**“You look like a boy/girl. Why use they instead of he/she?”**

I look like me. That’s all there is to it. If someone else looks at me and decides I am one thing or another based on the clothes I’m wearing, or whether I’m wearing makeup, that assumption is on them. It has nothing to do with who or what I actually am. Not only that, but — as our cis-het normative society can sometimes struggle to grasp — people who *do* identify as boys or girls can still look any number of ways, too. How a person looks or dresses is not an automatic confirmation of what you suppose their gender identity must be. Period.

**“You’re only one person! How does that work?”**

It’s really, really simple actually. In English, we already use singular “they” all the time when the gender of a person is unknown. Say you see 50 bucks on the ground and pick it up. You might say:

“Oh, someone dropped their money here. I’ll set it aside for them, I bet they are looking everywhere!”

Using gendered pronouns in this situation is awkward and clunky; after all, you wouldn’t say: “Oh, someone dropped his or her money here. I’ll set it aside for him or her, I bet he or she is looking everywhere!” So, we use the singular “they” instead.

When someone uses they/them pronouns, all you have to do is apply that same sentence construction:

“Oh, Desmond dropped their money here. I’ll set it aside for them, I bet they are looking everywhere!”

Now if only I could get 50 bucks every time someone’s rude about my gender. No, I’m kidding. Let’s move on.

**“I’m fine with nonbinary people, but I don’t believe in they as a singular pronoun. It makes no sense.”**

Not only are you on the wrong side of history, you’re also on the wrong side of English, my friend.

Major dictionaries have recognized the singular “they” as grammatically correct for years, including the [Oxford English Dictionary](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/they), [Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they), and [dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/they?s=t). We’re not exactly making up new words and grammar rules here. The [AP Style Guide,](https://blog.ap.org/products-and-services/making-a-case-for-a-singular-they) for the real grammar nerds among us, even allows the usage of singular “they” in cases where a subject doesn’t identify as male or female. (Not that the Associated Press is the arbiter of progressive, inclusive grammar — when Sam Smith [shared they were nonbinary](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/sam-smith-pronouns-theythem) and asked fans to call them by they/them pronouns, the Associated Press [wrote up the story](https://twitter.com/ashleycdye/status/1172599810601472000?s=20) using he/him.)

Beyond the singular “they” pronoun being correct grammatically, it’s also far from a modern invention. They has been used as a singular pronoun since at least the late 14th century, as seen in the circa-1375 French poem “William the Werewolf,” and some argue it was likely in use much earlier. Other historical examples of gender neutral pronouns range from literary — Jane Austen uses “they” in *Pride and Prejudice* — to medical, as when medical texts in the 1600s [referred](https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2018/09/05/the-long-long-history-and-bright-future-genderless-they/LhGIzOTm6PPKMKws8cE2SN/story.html) to individuals outside the gender binary as they/them. Neopronouns like “thon” and “hir” have [similarly found](https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/06/gender-neutral-pronouns-arent-new/619092/) strong footholds at different points in history, and as many as 250 gender neutral English-language pronouns have been advocated for since the 1780s.

Clearly, the singular “they” isn’t exactly a modern-day fad, and gender neutral pronouns have continued to make sense to a lot of people who know a lot about the English language. Why, then, does everyone get so hung up on this?

**“My nonbinary friend is okay with being called he/she, so I don’t think it’s a big deal.”**

Oh, boy.

If you’re using the pronoun your friend told you to use, great! Nonbinary people can use binary pronouns. Personally, I use both he and they, and I don’t mind either one. It doesn’t make me less nonbinary, and the words and terms that make me comfortable don’t apply to everyone.

But… (This is a very big but.)

If your friend prefers singular “they,” but doesn’t correct you when you use “he” or “she” instead, it may be because they don’t feel safe doing so. They could be afraid of getting into an awkward or dangerous situation by repeating themselves to someone who won’t listen.

It takes a lot of courage to reveal such personal information to others, and when someone comes out to you, it’s because they trust you enough to tell you something really important. I guarantee you’re not getting a free pass. You’re just making someone quietly uncomfortable, and potentially losing a friend.

Seriously, stop! And while you’re at it, you should probably say sorry to them.

**“How is it possible to be both he and they? Don’t you have to choose?”**

The short answer is: no. Pronouns are personal, which makes it impossible to offer a universal “why” for folks who use mixed pronouns, like they/he, she/her/they/them, or even he/she/they. Everyone’s gender identity is unique and individual to them!

There are some folks who identify as nonbinary and use only they/them pronouns. There are other people who feel that using both gendered and gender-neutral pronouns capture their full, nuanced gender identity the best, and some gender-fluid folks who may feel that different pronouns reflect them more accurately at different points in time. As Ada Powers, a writer and podcaster with mixed pronouns, put it in a [Twitter thread](https://twitter.com/mspowahs/status/1192192265898336257?lang=en):

“Pronoun pairs can be used to communicate a number of nuanced things. Using she/they as an example, the most common and straightforward is, ‘I identify as a woman, but also as nonbinary. I don't feel womanhood tells my full story, but I'm not fully divested from it, either.’”

And as far as pronoun order goes, they had this to say:

“He/they and they/he are not usually experienced the same,” she added. “They/he, for example, most commonly unpacks to ‘I use they/them pronouns, but if you can't hang with those, I won't be mortally offended if you use he/him.’ Or perhaps, ‘I'm predominantly nonbinary, but I want my masculinity to be recognized, and to be counted among men in contexts that collapse to a gender binary.’”

Not sure how to switch off between someone’s mixed pronouns? Ask them if they’d prefer that you use one pronoun over the other(s), or if an even mix of all would do the trick! And if the latter is true, be sure that you’re *actually* incorporating the mix — and not just sticking to the one pronoun that feels easiest to you.

**“This other person I know uses they/them/theirs pronouns. That must mean they’re nonbinary too, right?”**

Nope, not necessarily! As mentioned before, nonbinary folks — which include people who identify as not having a gender (something [agender](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-agender) can also capture), as being between genders, or as not having a fixed gender — can use binary pronouns. And people who don’t identify as nonbinary can use they/them/theirs pronouns, too. While it’s true that many nonbinary people *do* use they/them pronouns, in short, there’s no single they/them gender identity out there.

**[101 Deep Questions to Ask Anyone, From Friends to Partners](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/101-deep-questions-to-ask-anyone-from-friends-to-partners%22%20%5Cl%20%22intcid%3D_teen-vogue-right-rail_7c9c9b52-3544-414d-b949-34f642bdc7a2_popular4-1%22%20%5Ct%20%22_self)**

**BY ERIKA OWEN**

As Wren Sanders wrote for [them.](https://www.them.us/story/coming-out-they-them-pronouns): “When we assume an inextricable connection between preferring ‘they’ pronouns and being nonbinary, we risk overlooking not only nonbinary folx who do not use ‘they’ pronouns, but also the non-nonbinary folx who are entitled to being referred to in an affirming manner. Some nonbinary people don’t use ‘they’ pronouns. Some people who aren’t nonbinary do use ‘they’ pronouns. Allowing for this sort of complexity, in the end, ought to be the bedrock of progressive gender politics.”

**“I try to use they/them pronouns when people ask, but it’s so hard! I keep messing it up.”**

That’s okay! It happens to everyone. It takes time to adjust to new ways of speaking and thinking. Personally, I would much rather my friends and family mess up than give up entirely.

All I ask is for you to not make it my problem. Getting really apologetic or changing the subject to how difficult you find my pronouns won’t make me feel any more comfortable after I’ve been misgendered. Don’t tell me that you’re trying, show me. Try, and then if you get it wrong, correct yourself and move on.

Of course, there are people out there who will be harsh about good-faith mistakes. Sometimes it’s because they’re sensitized to being gendered a certain way. Other times, they’re just jerks. (Jerks come in all genders.) But in general, accidentally messing up pronouns is not the end of the world, as long as you’re holding yourself accountable.

*This story originally appeared on* [*Youth Radio*](https://youthradio.org/)*, a national network of next-generation storytelling. It was updated on December 15.*

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