



**VANDERBILT
UNIVERSITY®**

English Language Center

Pronoun Guide

A Supplement to What Should I Call YOU:
Faculty Modeling Vanderbilt's Commitment to Gender Inclusivity and Awareness

created by

The Vanderbilt University English Language Center

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>WHAT IS OUR PRONOUN GUIDE?</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>PRONOUN DESCRIPTION</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>NON-BINARY PRONOUNS</u>	<u>3</u>
'ZE/ZIR/ZIRS' AND 'ZE/HIR/HIRS'	3
NON-BINARY AND SINGULAR 'THEY'	4
USING NON-BINARY AND SINGULAR 'THEY'	4
NON-BINARY AND SINGULAR 'THEY' IN STYLEBOOKS	4
NON-BINARY 'THEY' ON TELEVISION	4
NON-BINARY PRONOUN RESOURCES	4
ACADEMIC SOURCES	4
NON-ACADEMIC SOURCES: NEWS & OPINIONS	4
<u>WRITING STRATEGIES TO AVOID GENDER BIAS</u>	<u>5</u>
GENDER BIAS EXERCISE	5
MORE EXERCISES FOR AVOIDING GENDER BIAS	6
MORE INFORMATION ABOUT AVOIDING GENDER BIAS IN ACADEMIC WRITING	6
<u>EMAIL SIGNATURES</u>	<u>6</u>
MORE INFORMATION ABOUT WRITING EMAIL SIGNATURES	6
<u>PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHIES</u>	<u>6</u>
BIOGRAPHIES AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY	6
<u>PRONOUN PREFERENCE WRITING ACTIVITY</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>APOLOGIZING IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE</u>	<u>7</u>
APOLOGY STRUCTURE	7
EXPRESSIONS OF APOLOGY	7
APOLOGY EXERCISE	8
<u>SUMMARY</u>	<u>8</u>

What Is Our Pronoun Guide?

Our Pronoun Guide was developed as a supplement to [What Should I Call YOU: Faculty Modeling Vanderbilt's Commitment to Gender Inclusivity and Awareness](#)¹ as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners at Vanderbilt University the opportunity to better understand and participate in this campus initiative.

This Pronoun Guide provides learners with:

- a descriptive explanation of pronoun usage specific to contexts at Vanderbilt University among other universities in the U.S.
- strategies to make informed choices regarding their own pronoun usage

Note: Because this guide is situated in particular social and cultural contexts, all aspects of pronoun usage described here may or may not be used by everyone at Vanderbilt, off-campus, or in other countries.

Pronoun Description

Pronouns function as references to and substitutes for nouns, which refer to people, places, things, or ideas. Note that in addition to grammatical features such as singular/plural (*e.g.*, ‘I’/‘we’) or subject/object (*e.g.*, ‘I’/‘me’), pronouns can encode (*i.e.*, symbolize) gender information. Gender information creates distinctions (creates different categories) only among 3rd person singular pronouns, as shown in the following chart:

3 rd Person Singular Pronouns	Gender					
	Feminine	Masculine	Neuter	Non-binary ²		
subject	she	he	it	they	ze /zi/ ³	ze /zi/
object	her	him	it	them	zir /zi:/	hir /hi:/
possessive	hers	his	its	theirs	zirs /zi:z/	hirs /hi:z/

Non-binary Pronouns

The chart above includes pronouns with grammatical gender: feminine, masculine, neuter, and non-binary. The pronouns commonly used for people, ‘she’ and ‘he’, create a gender binary “that refers to the idea that there are only two genders (*e.g.*, man/woman) and individuals should be gendered as either man or woman.”⁴

‘Ze/zir/zirs’ and ‘ze/hir/hirs’

‘Ze/zir/zirs’ and ‘ze/hir/hirs’ are non-binary singular pronouns that may be preferred by individuals whose gender identities are not exclusively masculine or feminine.

¹ Developed by the Vanderbilt University Faculty Senate Gender Inclusivity Task Force with input from [LGBTQI Life](#)

² See [Pronoun Guidance](#) from the Vanderbilt University Faculty Senate Gender Inclusivity Task Force for more information

³ Phonetic spellings use the [International Phonetic Alphabet](#)

⁴ See [Teaching Beyond the Gender Binary in the University Classroom](#) from the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching [The Vanderbilt University English Language Center](#)

Non-binary and Singular ‘they’

Using ‘they’ as a singular pronoun has a long history of use in the English language going back to at least the 1400s.⁵ Despite being common in both spoken and written English, use of singular ‘they’ remains contentious and is not always widely agreed upon. Using ‘they’ as a non-binary gendered pronoun is a recent development compared to singular ‘they’. Although many university departments and stylebooks may support non-binary and singular ‘they’, check the preferences of your professor, stylebooks (e.g., [APA Style](#) or [MLA Style](#)), or the person you are writing or speaking about.

Using non-binary and singular ‘they’

Refer to an individual who prefers non-binary ‘they’:

A student who feels that he/she/**they** is the target of such threat, harassment, intimidation, etc., may request from the Director of Student Accountability, Community Standards, and Academic Integrity, or the Director’s designee, stay away order to the identified student to cease further communication and/or desist from the conduct in question.⁶

Refer to pronouns or noun phrases such as ‘someone’, ‘everyone’, ‘no one’, ‘who’, ‘every teacher’, or ‘any person’:

Everyone completed **their** work on time.

Refer to an individual of unknown gender or if you want to leave the gender unspecified:

The source didn’t reveal **their** location to the journalist.

Non-binary and Singular ‘they’ in stylebooks

- [Stylebooks Finally Embrace the Single ‘They’](#)
- [The Use of Singular ‘They’ in APA Style](#)

Non-binary ‘they’ on television

- [Ellen Meets Trailblazing Actor Asia Kate Dillon \(Taylor in Showtime’s *Billions*\)](#)

Non-binary Pronoun Resources

Academic sources

- [Pronoun Guidance](#) by Vanderbilt University LGBTQI Life
- [What’s Your Pronoun?](#)

Non-academic sources: news & opinions

- [More Universities Move to Include Gender-neutral Pronouns](#)
- [Goodbye to ‘He’ and ‘She’ and Hello to ‘Ze’?](#)
- [The Gender-neutral Pronoun: 150 Years Later, Still an Epic Fail](#)
- [Yes, Your Pronouns Are up for Discussion](#)

⁵ “they, pron., adj., adv., and n.”, [OED Online](#), 2018, Oxford University Press

⁶ [Student Accountability](#), Vanderbilt University Student Handbook 2019–2020
[The Vanderbilt University English Language Center](#)

Writing Strategies to Avoid Gender Bias

The sentence below may be considered to contain gender bias because the masculine pronoun ‘his’ is used even though ‘scientist’ is being referred to in general:

A scientist should be careful not to bring his own prejudice into his own research.

Gender bias Exercise

Match the following example sentences in **Chart A** to each gender bias avoidance strategy below in **Chart B**.

Chart A: Example Sentences

A	Scientists should be careful not to bring their own prejudices into their research.
B	A scientist should not conduct research with prejudice.
C	A scientist should be careful not to bring their own prejudices into their own research.
D	Do not bring prejudice into research.
E	A scientist should be careful not to bring his or her own prejudices into his or her research.
F	One should not bring prejudice into one’s own research.
G	You should be careful not to bring prejudice into your research.
H	A scientist should be careful not to bring his own prejudices into his research. She should be especially careful when gathering and analyzing data.

Chart B: Gender Bias Avoidance Strategies

1	Use plural	A ⁷
2	Include both binary pronouns simultaneously	
3	Alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns	
4	Use singular ‘they’ ⁸	
5	Don’t use any pronouns	
6	Use the imperative (give an instruction)	
7	Use the second-person pronoun ‘you’	
8	Use generic ‘one’	

⁷ Answers: 1) A; 2) E; 3) H; 4) C; 5) B; 6) D; 7) G; 8) F

⁸ Some stylebooks and individuals may avoid non-binary or singular ‘they’ or provide rules regarding subject-verb agreement.

More exercises for avoiding gender bias

- [Gender & Pronouns: Explore Gender-neutral Wording](#)

More information about avoiding gender bias in academic writing

- [Avoiding Gender Biased Language](#) by the Vanderbilt University Writing Studio
- [APA Stylistics: Avoiding Bias](#) by the Purdue Online Writing Lab
- [Gender-inclusive Language](#) by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center

Email Signatures

You may see pronoun preferences in some email signatures, as seen in Signature A below. If you are not sure of pronoun preference, such as in Signature B, you can avoid using pronouns until you find out.

Signature A⁹	Signature B
<p>Dr. Jo Jones Pronouns: she/her/hers Associate Professor Vanderbilt University 2301 Vanderbilt Place Nashville, TN 37235</p>	<p>Deniz Sahin Department Coordinator Vanderbilt University</p>

More Information About Writing Email Signatures

- [Standards for E-mail Signatures](#) by Vanderbilt University

Professional Biographies

You may see pronoun preferences on professional and academic biographies. If pronoun preferences are not explicitly stated, read the text of the biography to look for which pronouns are used.

Biography A	Biography B
<p>Jamie Lee Associate Professor pronouns: they/them/theirs jamie.lee@example.edu Jamie graduated from Vanderbilt University with a PhD in Political Theory. In their downtime, Jamie enjoys attending concerts, playing tennis, and cooking.</p>	<p>Alex Graham – Professor alex.graham@example.edu Alex Graham is Professor Emeritus of English Literature at Vanderbilt University. He has published extensively in the areas of Literary Theory and the History of the English Language.</p>

Biographies at Vanderbilt University

- [English Language Center](#)
- [Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Life](#)
- [Peabody College Faculty](#)
- [Vanderbilt Law School Resident Faculty](#)
- [Women's and Gender Studies](#)

⁹ All persons in this guide's examples are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons is purely coincidental.
[The Vanderbilt University English Language Center](#)

Pronoun Preference Writing Activity

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate pronoun or name using information from the previous email signatures and professional biographies.

#	Individual	Activity ¹⁰
1	Dr. Jo Jones	_____ published _____ first article when _____ was 23.
2	Jamie Lee	_____ graduated from Vanderbilt University. Jamie got _____ PhD in Political Theory.
3	Alex Graham	_____ is Professor Emeritus of English Literature. _____ publications are in the areas of Literary Theory and the History of the English Language.
4	Deniz Sahin	_____ is a Department Coordinator at Vanderbilt University.

Apologizing if You Make a Mistake

When learning another language, it is common to make mistakes with pronouns. If you do, it is polite to offer a brief apology. On campus, you may also hear people apologizing for making a mistake with an individual's pronoun preference. Below is a framework for how you can apologize if you make a mistake with pronouns:

Apology Structure

1. Expression of apology
2. Explanation of what went wrong
3. Take responsibility
4. Promise

Without taking responsibility and making a promise not to repeat a mistake, apologies can be perceived as insincere.¹¹

Expressions of Apology

- I'm sorry.
- I'm sorry for _____.
- I apologize.
- I apologize for _____.

¹⁰ Answers:

1. "She published her first article when she was 23."
2. "They graduated from Vanderbilt University. Jamie got their PhD in Political Theory."
3. "He is Professor Emeritus of English Literature. His publications are in the areas of Literary Theory and the History of the English Language."
4. "Deniz Sahin is a department coordinator at Vanderbilt University."

¹¹ *An Exploration of the Structure of Effective Apologies* by Lewicki, Polin, & Lount, 2016, in *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* 9(2), pp. 177-196

Apology Exercise

1	<p>You: Have you finished the Jamie Kraska article? <i>He's</i> really hard to follow.</p> <p>Friend: Jamie goes by <i>she</i>.</p> <p>You (apology¹²):</p> <hr/>
2	<p>You (introducing a friend): This is Sascha. <i>She</i> is from Australia.</p> <p>Sascha: Hi, actually I go by <i>he</i>.</p> <p>You (apology¹³):</p> <hr/>

Summary

Our Pronoun Guide was developed as a supplement to [What Should I Call YOU: Faculty Modeling Vanderbilt's Commitment to Gender Inclusivity and Awareness](#) as a way to provide EAL learners the opportunity to better understand and participate in this campus initiative.

We hope this guide will help you make informed choices regarding pronoun usage. If you have questions or would like to request a potential workshop, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Note: Because this guide is situated in particular social and cultural contexts, all aspects of pronoun usage may or may not be used by everyone at Vanderbilt, off-campus, or in other countries.

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/pronoun-guide/>

¹² Example apology: "I'm sorry. It's my fault. I should look up the authors from now on."

¹³ Example apology: "I apologize. Sometimes I mix up my pronouns. I'll get it right in the future."