



Asking for Pronouns during a Maine Humanities Council Program: How & Why

Why ask for pronouns? What are pronouns even?

We at Maine Humanities Council strongly encourage facilitators to begin Discussion Project sessions by inviting participants to share their personal pronouns (in English or whatever language participants are speaking in, depending on specifics of the language).

An invitation to share pronouns can happen during the round of introductions and check in. It is great to also invite participants to put their pronouns in their Zoom name if you are meeting virtually or on their nametag/table tag, if you are meeting in-person.

In the English language, pronouns are used frequently to replace nouns. As in, “I love soft-serve ice cream. **It** is delicious.” When English speakers use a pronoun to replace a person’s name, they often use gendered pronouns. For example, “Wendy is really awesome. **She** bought me a soft-serve ice cream.” English language speakers often use singular they/them commonly when the pronouns of the person are unknown. For example, “Who left **their** book here?”

The dominant cultural framework teaches English speakers to assume other people’s gendered pronouns without asking. This practice assumes two things: 1. That gender is a binary (that there are only two possible genders: man & woman) and 2. Gender should be assumed based on how somebody looks.

However, we at MHC believe that every person gets to decide which pronouns are right for them and that their pronouns should be respected, however they look or dress.

Some of the possible pronouns that folks may choose include:

- She/her/hers
- He/him/his
- They/them/theirs
- Ey/em/eirs (pronounced ay, emm, airs)
- El/ella/ellas/ellos
- Ze/zem/zir (pronounced zee, zemm, zeer)

And many others. People also may choose to use multiple pronoun sets. Like she/they/ey or he/zi/they. Some people may just use their names. Some people may use one pronoun one day and another the next day.

Asking/inviting people to share pronouns in a discussion creates an environment in which all people are free to identify as they want to. Soliciting pronouns sends a message to all participants that we can't make assumptions about gender based on looks alone. Pronouns are like names. We would never assume someone's name without asking. Never assume someone's pronouns without asking. Starting a session with asking for pronouns also signals that our text-based discussions will investigate—and possibly push back against—the dominant cultural framework(s).

We want to ask and respect all people's pronouns because using the wrong pronouns for people can feel harmful, even harassing.

How do I ask for pronouns during a session?

Here is some language you can use, modify and make your own to solicit pronouns at the beginning of a Discussion Project:

As we go around and do introductions and respond to our lovely/engaging/funny check in question, please share your name and pronouns.

*For those who haven't done this before, sharing pronouns is a way to avoid making assumptions about gender. Pronouns are simply words we use when we are referring to you without your name. For example, **Michelle is really cool. She wears pink shirts.** Pronouns are just part of the English language. Many of us have been taught to assume pronouns and gender, but we want to invite everyone to share and practice not making assumptions about gender.*

While many of you may identify as men or women and go by he or she, that isn't always the case. Many people do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth or may identify as outside of the he/she binary. Many people use pronouns like they, zi, xe, ey or other pronouns.

For many people in this room, you may just say I'm Nancy and I use she. Or I'm Jamie and I use they. You don't have to share more than that or any additional information about your gender or gender identity. Of course, if you want to share more than your pronouns, you are welcome to.

If you don't feel comfortable sharing pronouns, simply share your name and we will all refer to your name when we speak with or about you.

Keep in mind that gender is magical and infinite and ever changing, so someone may share that they use he/him today and decide in a month to use they/them. Please respect their wishes.

Mistakes happen. If you use the wrong pronoun for a participant, simply correct yourself and move on. There is no need to make a big production of your mistake.

Please also update your screen name/name tag with your pronouns.

Mistakes

Mistakes happen. When and if *you* make a mistake, quickly correct yourself and move on. When you make a big production of apologizing about a mistake, that puts the emotional focus on you and not the other person. It can also make the other person feel like they need to comfort you or tell you it's okay. No need for all of that. Just correct yourself and move along.

If you realize you made a mistake *after the moment* has passed (later that day or later that week, for example), apologize via private message or chat directly to the person and move on. Again, it can feel tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel. Don't. Just correct the mistake, apologize, and move on.

Mistakes will also get made by others in your presence. If you hear a fellow participant using the wrong pronouns for someone else in the discussion, you should gently correct the person who made the mistake without necessarily bringing further attention to the person who has been misgendered. You can say something like, "Jan uses they/them pronouns" and leave it there.

If you witness continued and consistent misgendering of someone in the discussion, keep correcting. It's also a great idea to talk to the person being misgendered privately. You can check in with them and let them know that you noticed their wrong pronouns getting used. It can often feel hurtful for someone to be misgendered consistently in a group discussion, so great to acknowledge that. You can ask if it's okay for you to talk to the person making the mistakes privately to remind them about your pronouns and make a plan with them to do better. If it is okay with the participant, set up a time to talk with the person making the mistake and work with them to do better. Follow up as necessary with both participants.

+ + + + + + + +

This document draws direct references, guidance, inspiration from

- Umeko Motoyoshi UMESHISO @umeshiso_ on Instagram and their "Pronouns: A Beginner's Guide"
- [Pronouns.org](https://www.pronouns.org)
- [University of Wisconsin Milwaukee LGBTQ+ Resource Center](https://www.wisconsin.gov/lgbtq)