

Guidelines for the Use of Gender-Neutral Language

There is emerging public recognition of non-binary, gender fluid, or genderqueer pronoun preferences. This handout outlines some of the more common usages of gender-neutral language put forward by the gender fluid community.

Honorifics:

In order to provide gender-neutral titles that are not occupation specific, a number of options have been created by the non-binary community. The title that is most widely known and gaining prominence in current mainstream public discourse is Mx (pronounced Miks or Muks).

- Example: Mx. Pat Smith

Pronouns:

Historically, there has been a wide range of created English gender-neutral pronouns used. Some of the most common gender-neutral pronouns found in examples of popular and queer literature, which are also gaining mainstream public recognition, include the following:

- ze (subject). Example: When thirsty, ze gets a drink.
- hir (object). Example: I am tired of the noise; I will tell hir to be quiet.
- hir (possessive). Example: Pat took hir friend to the concert.
- hers (possessive). Example: I thought that was my book, but it turned out to be hers.
- hirself (reflexive). Example: Pat must figure that out for hirself.

Another option that some in the non-binary community prefer is to self-refer using the singular they.

- Examples:
 - Pat has said that they prefer having fish for dinner tonight.
 - Pat needs their book back tonight.
 - Pat has said that university was a very positive experience for them.

Guidelines for Language Use:

In general, the style guides recommend that writers use pronouns according to the grammatical rule that singular nouns take singular pronouns and plural nouns take plural pronouns. There are a number of solutions to ensure agreement including the following:

- Rewrite the sentence in plural form.
- Rewrite the sentence to change the pronoun to an article (a, an, the).
- Rewrite the sentence to remove the pronoun.

However, the style guides all acknowledge that **non-discriminatory language is necessary in academic writing and advise that people's pronoun choices are respected.**

Thus, when self-referencing, use the pronoun form/honorific that you prefer, whether that is a gendered or gender-neutral form.

When you are referencing someone else, the style guides offer the following directions:

- **APA** – “Respect people’s preferences; call people what they prefer to be called. Accept that preferences change with time and that individuals within groups often disagree about the designations they prefer. Make an effort to determine what is appropriate for your situation; you may need to ask participants which designations they prefer” (p. 72).
- **Chicago** – “In general, a person’s stated preference for a specific pronoun should be respected” (Chicago Manual of Style Online, 2017).
- **MLA** – While the MLA does not generally use the singular they, the MLA’s authorized website states “Writers who wish to use a non-gender-specific pronoun to refer to themselves may prefer they and their (or a neologism like hir). Likewise, writers should follow the personal pronoun choices of individuals they write about, if their preferences are known, and editors should respect those preferences. They may be used in a singular sense according to a person’s stated preference for it” (The MLA Style Center, 2018).

References

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychology Association* (6th ed.). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

The Chicago Manual of Style *Online*. (2017). 5.48: Singular “they” [Reference entry]. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/book/ed17/part2/ch05/psec048.html>

The MLA Style Center. (2018). What is the MLA’s approach to the singular *they*? [Ask the MLA FAQ]. Retrieved from <https://style.mla.org/singular-they/>

Mx. (2017). In *Oxford English dictionary* (online version). Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37988089?result=2&rskey=4dayYP&>