

# MYPRONOUNS.ORG RESOURCES ON PERSONAL PRONOUNS (/)

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## Mistakes

### WHAT IF SOMEONE MAKES A MISTAKE AND MISPRONOUNS SOMEONE ELSE?



Depending on the cultural, organizational, and situational context, and the personalities and positionalities of the people interacting, there are many different ways to act if there has been a mistake in referring to someone with the incorrect pronouns. Below are a few example scenarios of ways that people correct themselves or intervene if someone makes a mistake. Please note that these examples focus on times when mistakes are made because of forgetfulness or

ignorance -- different strategies may be necessary when people get pronouns wrong because they are being intentionally and consciously hateful.

#### *If you just recently made a mistake:*

**Example 1.** You are talking about someone who goes by “he/him” pronouns. “She is a great student. I’m sorry, I meant to say he is a great student. He’s been reading all of the assignments very thoroughly and it’s been a pleasure to work with him.” You don’t have to make a big deal out of your mistake or draw a lot of attention to it. You mostly need to fix it. You might have a follow up conversation with the person you referred to incorrectly to apologize or see if there’s something else you can do to correct it moving forward besides doing better. Making it a bigger deal in the moment is not necessarily

helpful and could be harmful unless that's what the person who was incorrectly referred to wants. Depending on the situation, you might be worried that people think you aren't friendly towards transgender people because you made a mistake, but generally it's good to avoid making the situation about you and your intent. A good way to show you are friendly is to get it right in the future and to act upon some of the other guidances you may find through this website or other resources.

**Example 2.** You are talking in a meeting about someone who goes by “they/them” pronouns. “His idea for that project is going to work very well. Let's try that.” Later, after the meeting, you realize that you used the incorrect pronouns for that person, so you go to them and say: “I'm really sorry I used the wrong pronouns for you in that meeting earlier. I know you go by ‘they/them’ and I will make sure I get it right next time.” You don't have to linger on the topic if the other person doesn't want to talk about it further, you can simply work to do better.

*If you realize you've been referring to someone with either an assumed set of pronouns or pronouns that might no longer be correct:*

**Example 3.** You have a friend who you've always called “she” because you always thought the friend is a woman and goes by “she.” You never had a reason to think anything else would be appropriate, but because you've recently learned that making assumptions about pronouns could be problematic, you realize you might want to ask people -- even those who you think are cisgender -- what pronouns they go by. “Hi Tennishia, how are you? ... I recently was learning about personal pronouns and so I've started to tell people that I go by ‘she’ and ‘hers’ pronouns myself. It helps me to create an environment where other people can feel comfortable to tell me what pronouns they go by, because some people really aren't comfortable with the pronouns everyone around them assumes work for them. I know we've known each other a long time, and I've always used ‘she’ and ‘hers’ pronouns to refer to you, but I realized I might be making some assumptions. Is ‘she’ and ‘hers’ okay or should I be using another set of pronouns to refer to you?”

**Example 4.** You are facilitating a meeting with people who are familiar with each other. “Good morning, everyone. I know that in some of our past meetings we have shared both our names and our personal pronouns, and we've discussed a bit about why pronouns matter. Even though we all know each other already, I thought it would be a good opportunity for us to share again what names and pronouns we are currently going by, just to remind ourselves that these things can change over time, and we want to get it right and make this an inclusive space. Feel free to share whatever you are comfortable with. My name is still ‘Dana’ and I am still going by ‘he’ and ‘him’ pronouns.”

*If someone else makes what you believe was a mistake:*

**Example 5.** You are talking with an acquaintance about a mutual work friend, Nikhil. Nikhil has told you they only go by “they/them” pronouns. “Oh yeah, Nikhil gave me his book to borrow last weekend.” You might respond in a few possible ways. One might be: “Oh? What book did they give you?” This gentle reinforcement could be better than saying “Oh, Nikhil goes by ‘they/them’ pronouns” for several reasons -- Nikhil might not have discussed that with your acquaintance, and the acquaintance might feel put into a corner or not understand much about pronouns. Depending on the relationships you have, there could be an educational conversation. You might also wonder whether Nikhil is consistently wanting “they/them” pronouns in all contexts or if they are only telling that to certain people. That’s why sometimes simply responding to conversations using what you understand to be the correct pronouns can be more helpful than other approaches. Of course, if Nikhil has told you they want you to actively correct other people, go for the educational approach!

**Example 6.** You are facilitating a workshop in the community with people who mostly don’t know each other, although they are friendly and care about diversity and inclusion. You’ve had a brief discussion about pronouns and included respecting pronouns in your community agreements, and people shared their names and most shared their pronouns at the beginning of the workshop. Later, one workshop participant says “Oh, I really agree with her comment. I also think...” but the person being referred to as “her” actually had earlier said that they go by “they” pronouns. There are many ways you could respond, but one might be speaking to the room: “Maria earlier mentioned they go by ‘they’ pronouns. I know for a lot of folks in this room these concepts about pronouns may seem new or it’s easy to forget them and revert to the assumptions we’ve been programmed to make, but it’s important that we work on this to get it right for folks, just as we’d want to make sure we call people by the right names. I’m happy to chat with anyone during the break who isn’t sure how to do this or what it means or anyone who simply wants to practice. Thanks for your affirmation of Maria’s comment, Dominique, I agree that they really were on point with that one.”

Now that you have some ideas about how to respond when someone makes a mistake, let's talk about how you can share your own personal pronouns (/sharing).

**CONTINUE TO THE NEXT SECTION - SHARING (/SHARING)**

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