

Frequently Asked Questions About Pronouns

What are pronouns?

- A pronoun is a word that is used instead of a noun or noun phrase. For instance, if you found a wallet on the bus, you might say, “Oh no! They left their wallet!”
- There are many pronouns available. The most common pronouns are “he”, “she”, and “they”. Some people do not use any pronouns, and are addressed only by their name.

Why do pronouns matter to people?

- It is a useful, natural part of our language that conveys gender identity¹.
- Regardless of gender, it is disrespectful to use the incorrect pronouns for someone.
- For some transgender and gender non-binary people² pronouns are an important part of expressing their identity.
- Consistently using the wrong pronouns, especially after being corrected, is invalidating.

Why should I put my pronouns in my email signature?

- As MNW employees, it shows that we value creating safe, inclusive spaces for people of any gender and that gender cannot be assumed based on appearance, voice, or name.
 - This recognition creates a safer, more inclusive environment for transgender and non-binary folks.
- As a cisgender³ person (or “cis” for short), sharing your pronouns normalizes the practice and is often more impactful than a transgender person doing so.

Why should MNW make this standard practice?

- Unity is an essential part of normalization, and an organization-wide commitment is much more impactful than an individual commitment.
- It makes it easier to avoid misgendering someone.
- It helps combat sexism.
 - It is a common assumption that gender-neutral names belong to men. By not sharing their pronouns, some folks are treated with greater respect because the other party believes they are a man⁴.
 - Sharing our pronouns combats this bias by stating openly that one can occupy a position of power without passing as a man.

If we ask staff and students to include their pronouns, wouldn't that “out” trans folk who might not be ready or comfortable sharing that information?

- This addition is optional.
- Some transgender and non-binary people are decidedly not “out” in any way, and this would not change that.
- Volunteering our pronouns creates a safer space for people who are not “out” but would like to be. It also lowers the chances of someone being misgendered due to their appearance, voice, or name.

What do I say if someone asks why I have pronouns in my email signature?

- “It is an optional part of MNW’s signature block that helps create a more inclusive space for people.”
- “It supports MNW’s Non-Discrimination Policy and Equal Employment Opportunity practice.”
 - All employment decisions at (MNW) are based on merit, qualifications, and abilities. MNW does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, physical or mental ability, or any other status protected under local, state, or federal laws in the admission of otherwise qualified students or the administration of its educational policies or programs, hiring, or employment practices.
 - Montessori Northwest does not discriminate against students or potential students on the basis of race, religion or creed, age, color, national or ethnic origin, sex or gender, gender identity, veteran or military status, sexual orientation, or the presence of any sensory, mental, or physical disability or use of a trained guide dog or service animal by a person with a disability in its admission policies, educational policies, or any administered programs.

This FAQ was originally developed by the City of Portland DEEP LGBTQ & Friends Affinity Group Leadership 2017 and modified by Montessori Northwest.

¹ Gender identity: A person’s internal, deeply-felt sense of being male, female, both, neither, or other gender(s)

² Transgender people: People whose gender does not match their sex assigned at birth. Gender non-binary people: People whose gender is neither male nor female.

³ The word “cisgender” was coined as a more respectful way of saying someone is “not transgender”. From Latin, “cis” is a prefix that means “on the same side of” while “trans” is a prefix that means “transcend or across”.

⁴ A 2012 Yale study confirmed a similar instance of gender bias. Résumés with traditionally male names were disproportionately considered more competent and hireable than the same résumés with traditionally female names.