

What's Your Pronoun?

by Miriam Newman (she/her)

The question is showing up on more and more camp and event registration forms: “What’s your preferred personal pronoun?” Some folks are very happy to see it and some don’t notice it as anything unusual. Some folks aren’t quite sure what’s being asked; for you, I’ll endeavor to briefly explain.

In English, many pronouns—the words we use to refer to people when we’re not calling them by name—are linked to a person’s **gender**, the personal sense of being male, female, both male and female, neither male nor female, somewhere between male and female, other. Every baby is given a gender assignment of *female* or *male* at birth, based on the baby’s physical characteristics. People whose gender identity aligns with cultural expectations for the gender assigned at birth are often referred to as *cisgender*; people whose gender identity does not align with cultural expectation for the gender assigned at birth are often referred to as *transgender*. People who identify other than male or female often use terms such as third gender, genderqueer, agender, genderskeptical. An umbrella term is *nonbinary*, which refers to not being easily defined as part of a male/female either/or. People—cisgender and transgender—experience their gender in a variety of ways, and people express their gender identities in a variety of ways. For instance, for some people, wearing a skirt is part of expressing femininity or girliness, while for others wearing a skirt is just part of dressing for airflow and comfort.

People also talk about gender in a variety of ways, but one of the ways the English language makes us talk about gender is with **pronouns**. When we’re referring to a specific individual not by name, we usually use a pronoun—she, he, they, ze, etc.—to represent that person. The most common English personal pronouns are *she*—primarily for

people who identify as female—and *he*—primarily for people who identify as male. Many nonbinary people prefer to avoid he and she and instead prefer gender-neutral pronouns like the singular *they* or the recently-created pronoun *ze*.

If you’re not used to using *they* for one person, remember that it works just the same way as using *you* for one person. For example, I might say “You are an excellent dancer!” and you’d see nothing wrong with the plural *you are* combined with the singular *a dancer*. In the same way, if someone uses *they* as their personal pronoun, you would say, “They are an excellent dancer!”

Pronouns are linked to **gender identity**, not **anatomy** or **sexuality**. When people ask for your pronouns, they’re not asking what’s in your pants or who you want to date. They just want to know the correct way to refer to you when talking with another person or making introductions.

Being called the wrong pronoun can be disorienting and uncomfortable. To help themselves avoid mistakes, CDS Boston Centre’s Swing into Summer co-chairs decided to take a direct approach this year, and ask: how would you like us to refer to you?

I’m Miriam. My pronouns are she/her. Let’s go dance!

Miriam Newman started dancing English, Scottish, contra, and longsword in 2003 at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia, learned to call there and in New York City with CDNY, and now dances and calls English in Boston with CDS Boston Centre. When not dancing, she edits children’s books. This article is reprinted, with minor edits by the author, from the CDS Boston News, Summer 2015.

Editor’s note: While learning the new pronouns, a basic primer may be helpful to some folks. Cisgender has its origin in the Latin-derived prefix cis-, meaning “on this side of,” which is an antonym for the prefix “trans-” meaning “across from” or “on the other side of.” Easy for dancers to remember! Binary is something made of or based on two things or parts (such as male and female). Nonbinary is not restricted to two things: grammatically-speaking, in reference to pronouns, it can refer to either male or female or both or neither. A good background article, I’ve found, is from the New York Times earlier this year, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/education/edlife/a-university-recognizes-a-third-gender-neutral.html?_r=0.)

Our thanks to Miriam for sharing her article with us. Let us know how the conversation is going in your community.