



# BREAKING THE BINARY: GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENGLISH AT WORK

An Abundance HR Handbook

## Overview

- Vocabulary
- Singular *they* conjugation
- Suggested gender-inclusive language
- Frequently asked questions
- Resources & contact info

## Vocabulary

- Sex - male, female, intersex, AFAB, AMAB (assigned female/male at birth)
- Gender - man, woman, nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, autigender, two-spirit
  - Gender identity - cisgender, transgender, two-spirit
  - Gender expression - feminine, masculine, gender non-conforming
- Sexual orientation - heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, bicurious, pansexual, demisexual, asexual, aromantic, queer



## BREAKING THE BINARY: GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENGLISH AT WORK

This is how you conjugate the singular they.

|                                 |            |                                            |
|---------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subject</b>                  | They       | They asked me what my pronouns are.        |
| <b>Object</b>                   | Them       | I gave them a call when I heard the news.  |
| <b>Possessive</b>               | Their      | They called their manager for advice.      |
| <b>Possessive demonstrative</b> | Theirs     | This one is mine; that one is theirs!      |
| <b>Intensive reflexive</b>      | Themselves | Emma is by themselves in the meeting room. |

### Suggested gender-inclusive language

What are other ways I can be inclusive with my language at work?

- Review familiar gendered language and suggested gender-inclusive substitutions on the next page.
- Identify a natural starting point for you.
- Slow down to align the intention of your words with impact.



## BREAKING THE BINARY: GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENGLISH AT WORK

| Instead of...                                                                                                                                                  | Consider...                                                                                                                     | Thoughts                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ms./Mr./Miss<br><br>ma'am/sir                                                                                                                                  | Mx. or X.<br><br>A specific title to designate respect for authority.                                                           | Some honorifics are gender-neutral.<br><br>Courtesies like the conditional or subjunctive tenses or words like please and thank you.                                                 |
| Hi ladies! How are you doing today?                                                                                                                            | Hi folks! or Hi y'all! or Hi everyone!<br>How are you doing today?                                                              | Is your perception that everyone in the group identifies as a woman based on assumptions?                                                                                            |
| How are you guys doing today? (informal)                                                                                                                       | How is everyone doing today? How are y'all doing today?                                                                         | Even colloquially, inclusive phrasing addresses everyone.                                                                                                                            |
| This woman sent me an email introducing me to her organization.                                                                                                | This person/colleague/champion sent me an email introducing me to their organization.                                           | There's no shortage of ways to describe a person without assuming their gender. Can you be specific or creative?                                                                     |
| Do you and your son talk about sports?                                                                                                                         | What do you and your child talk about?                                                                                          | You can take some of the pressure off of kids by encouraging them to be themselves without adults imposing their assumptions. Honoring children's pronouns builds their self-esteem. |
| Please invite your husband or wife to dinner.<br><br>My niece and nephew visited me at work.<br><br>My org's maternity and paternity leave policy is generous. | Please invite your partner to dinner.<br><br>My niblings visited me at work.<br><br>My org's parental leave policy is generous. | Support the relationships in your network by removing limits established by gendered language.                                                                                       |



# **BREAKING THE BINARY: GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENGLISH AT WORK**

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **How do I find out what someone's pronouns are?**

- Introduce yourself and your pronouns to create space and set a standard script in your conversations so others feel comfortable sharing with you too.
  - Hi, my name is Emma, and I use they/them pronouns. Do you have pronouns you'd like me to use for you?
  - Hi, my name is Emma. My pronouns are they/them. What are your pronouns?
- Respond and respect when people introduce their name & pronouns.

### **How can I specify when "they" refers to a plural noun?**

- There are many ways that you can indicate that you're referring to a group of two or more. See examples:
  - Emma is passionate about their HR career. (1 person)
  - Emma and their boss are online. Let's invite them both to lunch. (2 people)
    - You can use "the two of them" or "those two" as well.
  - Emma empowers them all to practice using their pronouns. (3+ people)

### **I don't use nonbinary pronouns. Should I still share mine?**

- Pronouns belong to all of us. Self-awareness nurtures healthier relationships.
- Whether you consciously think of it or not, your gender identity, expression, and pronouns influence your experiences, relationships, health, and opportunities.
  - Develop the tools to explore your gender identity and live authentically.
  - Celebrate diversity and build connections with people of all genders.
- When cisgender people disrupt the practiced script by sharing their pronouns, they:
  - Create safe space for trans people to share pronouns.
  - Create a learning opportunity for people who have not had the opportunity to practice sharing their pronouns before.

### **Is it rude to refer to everyone using they/them pronouns?**

- Breaking the binary requires rewiring implicit bias in your brain.
- Build the mental and verbal habit by using they/them pronouns for everyone.
- When someone tells you their pronouns, use those pronouns.
  - Asking for help to honor someone's pronouns is a sign of respect.
- Using they/them for everyone when you meet them for the first time does not prevent cis women from using she/her or cis men from using he/him. You invite people to define themselves for you, rather than letting your assumptions lead.



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## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **How can I use my cisgender privilege to create safe space?**

- Be gentle as you learn new ideas about gender in the cultures you encounter.
- Post your pronouns next to your name on communications and social media.
- Break the ice by modeling how you introduce your pronouns.
- Invite the whole group without singling out who you "suspect" will share pronouns.
- Recognize that folks may be less open to sharing when being recorded.
- Honor your colleagues' correct pronouns even when they're not present with you.

### **Do I correct someone who misgenders my colleagues?**

- Ask your trusted colleague what approach they'd like you to take on their behalf.
- Repeated intentional misgendering can be discrimination or human rights violation.
- Prioritize the comfort and wellbeing of trans people when disclosing pronouns.

### **How can I correct someone when they misgender my colleagues?**

- "Emma used she/her growing up, but they use they/them pronouns now."
- "Maybe you didn't know, but Emma uses they/them pronouns."
- "Can I remind you that Emma uses they/them pronouns?"
- "When I say 'they' in this story, I am referring to Emma, who uses singular they."

### **I'm scared of making a mistake! What do I do if I misgender someone?**

- Even with the best intentions, we all make mistakes. Here's how you can respond:
  - Breathe. Slow down!
  - Listen to feedback, which is a sign of building safety and trust.
  - Say "thank you for correcting me."
  - Rephrase what you said with the correct pronouns, remember, and move on.
  - Keep practicing! Practice when you're alone. Practice with your kids. Practice with your parents. Practice with your friends. Practice with strangers.

### **I keep referring to someone using the wrong pronoun! How do I stop?**

- Ask yourself why you keep using the wrong pronoun. Commit to practicing.
- Best practice when in conversation: "I want to use your pronouns correctly. Could you please tell me how you conjugate them?"



# BREAKING THE BINARY: GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENGLISH AT WORK

## Resources

### Non-exhaustive list of online resources

- [European Professional Association for Transgender Health](#)
- [Gender Minorities Aotearoa](#)
- [International Journal of Transgender Health](#)
- [Duolingo: How gender neutral language has evolved around the world](#)
- [Merriam Webster: Singular nonbinary conjugation](#)
- [National Center for Transgender Equality](#)
- [OHCHR: The struggle of trans and gender diverse persons](#)
- [Outright International](#)
- [Pronouns.org](#)
- [Reuters Graphics: Gender & Language](#)
- [Stonewall.org.uk: 10 ways to step up as an ally to non-binary people](#)
- [Them.us: Gender-neutral pronouns 101](#)
- [Transgender Law Center](#)
- [TransHub.org.au: What are pronouns?](#)
- [United Nations: Guidelines for gender-inclusive language](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)
- [World Professional Association of Transgender Health: Standards of Care](#)

## About Abundance HR

Emma Arcos (they/them) has practiced HR since 2017. From their leadership position at an educational non-profit radio station, they were inspired to choose a career path of people and culture work. In 2019, they developed this pronouns training to improve accessibility needs in customer service environments and received great acclaim. Since launching Abundance HR Consultancy in 2020, Emma has partnered with diverse organizations to develop employer branding opportunities and support an employee experience of radical inclusion.

This handout accompanies the 90-minute DEI training  
**Breaking the Binary: Gender-Inclusive English at Work.**

For consulting opportunities, connect with Abundance HR at [abundance-hr.com](https://abundance-hr.com).