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Nonbinary Pronouns

Pronouns are the words that people use to refer to themselves and others, beyond an individual's name. Historically, the most common third-person pronouns in the United States have been “she/her/her” and “he/him/his” to refer to one person and “they/them/their” to refer to more than one person. At least since the mid-18th century, U.S. writers and scholars have proposed gender-inclusive, third-person singular pronouns to try to alleviate the lack of such an option in the English language, but none caught on until nonbinary trans people began widely adopting “they/them/their” in the singular for themselves. In the 2010s and 2020s, nonbinary youth created a tremendous number of *pleopronouns* (nonthemed pronouns like “xe/xem”) and *nounself* pronouns (pronouns based on the name of an object, figure, animal, or concept that reflects something about the person or their gender like “moon” or “doe”). But “they/them/their” continues to be the main set of pronouns used by nonbinary people.

The Use of “They/Them/Their”

Since at least the 1300s, “they/them/their” was commonly used in both the singular and plural in British and then U.S. literature, but this usage fell out of favor in the 1800s, when “he/him/his” became the default singular form to refer to all people (despite opposition from many women). Ever since then, people have proposed gender-inclusive, third-person pronouns to replace the generic masculine, and in his book *What's Your Pronoun?*, linguist Dennis Baron lists more than 150 different pronouns that have been suggested from the 1770s until today. These include “hesh” (combining “he” and “she”), which Baron traces back to the early 1870s, and “thon” (blending “that” and “one”), which first appeared in print in 1884 and was subsequently adopted by a small number of publications.

“They/them/their” continued to be the most widely adopted third-person singular pronouns in the 19th and 20th centuries, but only in the sense of referring to a person whose gender was not known or was not important in the particular context (e.g., “anyone who thinks the 2020 U.S. presidential election was stolen is out of *their* minds”). Beginning in the late 20th century, “they/them/their” also started to be used to refer to a person whose gender is known, but who does not identify as female or male, and by the 2010s, this usage had become so widely accepted that it was embraced as appropriate language by the news media, online dictionaries, and writing style guides. For example, “they” in the singular was added to the style guide of the *Washington Post* in 2015 and to the Associated Press stylebook in 2017, and all major online dictionaries, including the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [OxfordDictionaries.com](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com), and [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com), updated their entries on “they” in the 2010s to indicate that the singular form is grammatically correct. “They” in the singular was

even declared the “Word of the Year” by Merriam-Webster in 2019 and by the American Dialect Society in 2015; the latter group subsequently voted the singular “they” as its “Word of the Decade” for the 2010s and “(my) pronouns” as its 2019 “Word of the Year.”

The driving force behind the widespread embrace of the singular “they” are nonbinary young people, many of whom go by “they/them/their.” In a study of the more than 1.2 million students who filled out the Common Application to apply to U.S. colleges and universities for fall 2022 admission, Genny Beemyn found that just over 3% (more than 36,800 students) indicated that they referred to themselves using pronouns beyond just “she/her” or “he/him.” Of these students, nearly 97% used “they/them” as one of their pronoun sets (most often along with “she/her”), including 22% who went only by “they/them.”

Pleopronouns and Nounself Pronouns

While most nonbinary young people use “they/them/their” for themselves, these are not the only nonbinary pronouns that have caught on to some degree. For example, in the Common Application study, Beemyn found that the students provided about 75 different neopronouns (i.e., new pronouns or pronouns besides “he,” “she,” “they,” and “it”), resulting in their use of about 145 different pronoun sets. The most common pleopronouns reported were “xe/xem” or “xie/xim” and “ze/zir” or “ze/hir”; others included “ae/aer,” “e/eir,” “per/pers,” and “ve/ver.” Some of the students also used nounself or themed pronouns. Unlike other neopronouns, nounself pronouns are often playful and their use is mostly limited to social media and gaming platforms. The two most popular nounself pronouns indicated by the students were “fae/faer” (from “fairy”) and “bun/buns” (from “bunny”). Because pleopronouns and nounself pronouns are not widely known in mainstream society or even in some trans communities, relatively few nonbinary people use just a neopronoun for themselves. In the Common Application study, just 19 students stated that they go by only a pleopronoun or a nounself pronoun.

Future Nonbinary Pronoun Trends

Given the near ubiquitous use of “they/them/their” pronouns among nonbinary people today, it is likely to remain the most common set of nonbinary pronouns for the foreseeable future. However, with more and more young people coming out as nonbinary, other sets of pronouns will seemingly gain adherents, especially as Gen Alpha youth seek to differentiate themselves from members of Gen Z. But, regardless of what pronouns a nonbinary person uses for themselves, the important point is to respect how they identify and use the pro-

nouns they request.

See also [Gender Identity Labels](#); [Genderqueer](#); [Nonbinary Genders](#); [Trans Identities](#)

Further Readings

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