ANAGNORI

I'm asexual, aromantic and
nonbinary. Online nerd; offline
therapist. He/She/They
pronouns are all fine for me.

AROMANTICISM
ASEXUALITY
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MY ESSAYS
GLOSSARY
HELP, ADVICE AND RESOURCES
WRITING ASEXUALITY IN
FICTION
ABOUT

ARCHIVES
RSS

SEARCH

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A Non-Binary Person's Guide to Invented Pronouns

Here are some grammar facts that may be useful if you're interested in creating or learning new pronouns, such as zie/hir/hirs or e/em/eirs. Why bother creating new pronouns? What do the slashes mean? How do you know when to use "zie" and when to use "hir"? And if you create new pronouns, how do you make them easy to use and remember? This guide will explain it all.

Warning: Intense linguistics geekery ahead, but you don't need to know anything about linguistics or grammar to understand it.

Why create new pronouns? Aren't the usual ones enough?

Oddly enough, no. English has a "gap" in its grammar. The language is literally missing a word that ought to be there. This causes issues for all English speakers, not just non-binary folks. In fact, people have been trying to invent words to fill the gap since before the idea of non-binary genders even existed*: the invented pronoun "thon" dates to about 1859.

(*A clarification, since some people have misinterpreted this bit: I mean that the English words "transgender" and "non-binary gender" were invented in the 20th century. You can't reliably apply these concepts to all non-Western cultures or to older historical eras, but phenomena similar to these things have existed since ancient times around the world.)

Where is the gap? It's the "third person singular animate gender-neutral pronoun" category. Here's what that means:

Pronouns can be "first person" (I, me, we, us), "second person" (you, y'all), or "third person." All of the first and second person pronouns are gender-neutral, so nobody bothers creating new pronouns for those. It's just the third person pronouns that have a problem.
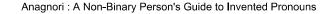
Modern English has six common third person pronouns:

- He/him - masculine
- She/her - feminine
- It - singular, un-gendered, inanimate
- They/them - plural, gender-neutral
- They/them - singular, gender-neutral
- One - indefinite

As you can see, there are already three pronouns that can refer to a single person in a gender-neutral way. Unfortunately, all three of them have issues.

"It" is a bad option because it is inanimate. An inanimate pronoun is used to refer to objects and sometimes animals, not people. So if you call someone "it" you're calling them subhuman, which is Not Good. (A few people actually prefer to be called "it," but you should never call someone "it" unless that person explicitly requests it.)

The indefinite pronoun "one," as in "One shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth," is mostly used for abstract or theoretical situations, or if you're trying to be super-f̶o̶r̶m̶a̶l̶

SCROLL TO TOP

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CASSADAGA THEME BY MBACANI

getting replaced by the "indefinite you" - "*You* shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth." Most people will just get confused if you try to use this to refer to a specific person, so it's not a good choice, either.

The best option of the three is the singular "they." The singular "they" is perfectly grammatical, and it's a good pronoun to use if you don't know what someone's correct pronouns are. (It should not be applied to people who prefer a different pronoun, however, because that is degendering.)

Unfortunately, "they" has the problem of being ambiguous sometimes, because it can also refer to a group of people. It's difficult to write a sentence like "They saw them," and not think one of those is plural. "They" can also refer to a group of inanimate objects, which means it can sound weird or demeaning sometimes if you don't structure your sentences carefully.

Singular "they" just isn't a very specific word. It's good for pronouns to be specific: it makes them less confusing. (Some languages get by with only a few vague pronouns, but they have other grammar tricks to make it clear who's being talked about.) It's common for new pronouns to develop because one pronoun wasn't specific enough: for example, many English dialects have acquired "y'all," "youse," or another second-person plural pronoun, because using "you" for both singular and plural was too ambiguous. So creating a new pronoun instead of using the singular "they" is a reasonable choice, too.

There are also other reasons why a person may wish to create a new pronoun. Not all recently-invented pronouns are meant to be gender-neutral; some of them refer to a specific non-binary gender or gender experience. Some pronouns are also meant to suggest other aspects of a person's identity besides gender.

But they aren't grammatically correct!

Bullshit. The point of using someone's preferred pronouns is to demonstrate that you respect their identity and want them to feel safe around you. If you think grammatical correctness is more important than making other people feel accepted and safe, then you are an asshole.

Besides, in linguistics there's no such thing as "grammatical correctness." The only thing that makes a sentence "good" is whether your listeners or readers understand what you are saying. "Proper grammar" isn't intrinsically better - it's just the grammar that is promoted by tradition, habit, and people in power. In practice, the main functions of "proper grammar" are to stigmatize the languages of oppressed groups, reduce their social mobility, and promote negative stereotypes about their intelligence. Just look at the treatment of African-American Vernacular English for an example.

Thirdly, languages change, and people invent new words all the time. Language exists to serve the needs of its speakers. It's a tool, not a holy artifact that must be kept pristine. As the world changes, and our culture changes, modern ideas like "non-binary" and "transgender" will need new vocabulary so that we can talk about them effectively. New pronouns are a way for people to challenge old sexist and cissexist ideas, and to expand language to better express ourselves. When we invent new words to describe what we are, we are demonstrating our self-respect, and demanding that our experiences be acknowledged by other people. It is a form of empowerment, a way to reclaim our language as *ours*.
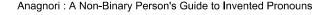
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So don't tell me that these new pronouns are unimportant and pointless. There is *always* a point. When you take away people's words, you are taking away their voices, and telling them that their experiences are not valid or worthy of discussion.

But that's enough sociolinguistic arguing. Let's move on the the fun part: the grammar!

Pronoun Case

English pronouns have "case," which means that they change depending on what part of the sentence they're in. For instance, "they" can appear as they, them, their, theirs, themselves, or (in some dialects) themself.

English teachers say that English has subject case, object case, and possessive case. Linguists say that English has nominative case, oblique case, and genitive case. They mean the same things, they just use different names. (It's actually a bit more complicated than that, but I'm trying to keep things simple here.)

Since more people are familiar with subject/object/possessive, those are the terms I'll be using here. If you already know these concepts, you can skip to the "When Learning a New Pronoun" section.

The **subject** case is used for the person who acts or does something. Subject pronouns usually appear at the start of a phrase, before the verb. The verb is the word for the action, event, or process happening, like "eat," "think" or "believed."

- **He** told me about the TV show.
- **They** are coming over for dinner.
- **We** gave him a kitten.
- **Zie** wants to know if **you** are feeling better.
- **She** asked him to visit but **he** didn't get the text message.

In the last two examples, the "if" and "but" are important. These little words are used to link two phrases together. Each of the phrases has its own subject pronoun.

The **object** case is the person who is acted upon, or who receives the action. Object pronouns usually appear in the middle or end of a phrase. Occasionally they'll appear at the start, but then they're usually preceded by a linking word like "for," "to," or "with."

- I called **him** a bad word.
- We saw **them** yesterday.
- I asked **hir** what hir pronouns were.
- You told **me** a lie so then I told **it** to **him**.

The last example is another pair of linked phrases, connected by "so then." Note that "it" and "him" are *both* treated as object pronouns.

(To anyone who wants to say "him" is actually an "indirect object" - that's not important here. I'm talking about *morphological* case, not syntactic case, and there is no morphological indirect object case in English.)

The **possessive** case is where things get a bit weird. English actually has two sets of possessive pronouns, one set for adjectives and one set for nouns. A noun is a person, place, thing, or idea, like "cat," "James," "game," or "happiness." An adjective is a word that describes a noun, like "happy," "tiny," or "mysterious."

SCROLL TO TOP

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There's also a whole different system for making non-pronoun words possessive, and some linguists argue that the "possessive" isn't really a case at all, but those aren't important here so I won't go into those topics.

The possessive nouns are words that you can use to replace other nouns. For instance, "their dog" can be called "theirs," and "my book" can be called "mine." The possessive nouns in common use are "mine," "yours," "his," "hers," "its," "ours," and "theirs." My dialect also has "y'all's."

- I lost my key, can I borrow **yours**?
- **Mine** is old and rusty but **hers** is new.
- That's a cute rabbit of **theirs**.
- I hope it isn't one of **ours** that got hurt.
- I found an old shirt of **eirs**, but **xyrs** is still missing.

The possessive adjectives in common use are "my," "your," "his," "her," "its," "our" and "their." - and, in my dialect, "y'all's."

- **Her** dog is tiny.
- I like **their** hairstyle.
- Have you seen **hir** textbook?

Telling the difference between a noun and an adjective can be tricky sometimes. The key is that possessive adjectives are always followed by some other noun, while possessive nouns are not.

Some newly-coined pronouns use identical forms for both types of possessive, while others have a different form for each, usually marked by putting an -s on the end of the possessive noun. See: her vs. hers, their vs. theirs, eir vs. eirs, xyr vs. xyrs.

Reflexive pronouns aren't really a case, either, but they're a handy feature. They help to avoid ambiguity, and they make sentences sound less repetitive. They're easy to spot: "myself," "yourself," "himself," "herself," "itself," "oneself," "ourselves," "yourselves," and "themselves." The reflexive form of the "singular they" can be either "themselves" or "themself."

I've never seen a reflexive pronoun (old or new) that *didn't* end in -self or -selves. Any pronouns you make will probably fit this pattern, too - if they don't, expect people to get confused.

When Learning a New Pronoun…

The order of pronoun forms usually goes like this:

> subject / object / possessive adjective / possessive noun / reflexive

For example, the set of "e" Spivak pronouns looks like this:

> e / em / eir / eirs / eirself

In my perfect linguistic fantasy world, every pronoun would have all five forms, and you could organize them in a neat chart like this one:

SCROLL TO TOP

	Nominative (subject)	Oblique (object)	Possessive determiner	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive
Traditional pronouns					
He	He laughed	I called him	His eyes gleam	That is his	He likes himself
She	She laughed	I called her	Her eyes gleam	That is hers	She likes herself
One	One laughed	I called one	One's eyes gleam	—	One likes oneself
Conventions based on traditional pronouns					
She/he	She/he laughed	I called him/her	His/her eyes gleam	That is his/hers	She/he likes him/herself
S/he (compact)	S/he laughed	I called him/r	His/r eyes gleam	That is his/rs	S/he likes him/herself
Singular they	They laughed	I called them	Their eyes gleam	That is theirs	They like themself
Yo (regional)[20][21]	Yo laughed	I called yo	—	—	?
Invented pronouns					
Spivak (old)	E laughed	I called em	Eir eyes gleam	That is eirs	E likes eirself
Spivak (new)[32]	Ey laughed	I called em	Eir eyes gleam	That is eirs	Ey likes emself
Humanist[33]	Hu laughed	I called hum	Hus eyes gleam	That is hus	Hu likes humself
Per[34]	Per laughed	I called per	Per eyes gleam	That is pers	Per likes perself
Thon[35]	Thon laughed	I called thon	Thons eyes gleam	That is thons	Thon likes thonself
Jee, Jeir, Jem[36]	Jee laughed	I called jem	Jeir eyes gleam	That is jeirs	Jee likes jemself
Ve[37]	Ve laughed	I called ver	Vis eyes gleam	That is vis	Ve likes verself
Xe[38]	Xe laughed	I called xem	Xir eyes gleam	That is xyrs	Xe likes xemself
Ze (or zie or sie) and zir (Germanic Origin)[39]	Ze laughed	I called zir/zem	Zir/Zes eyes gleam	That is zirs/zes	Ze likes zirself
Ze (or zie or sie) and hir[40]	Ze laughed	I called hir	Hir eyes gleam	That is hirs	Ze likes hirself
Ze and mer[41]	Ze laughed	I called mer	Zer eyes gleam	That is zers	Ze likes zemself
Zhe, Zher, Zhim[42]	Zhe laughed	I called zhim	Zher eyes gleam	That is zhers	Zhe likes zhimself

([Original chart here](#).)

Unfortunately, very few of the recently-coined pronouns have all their forms listed, which means that you have to play "guess the form!" Here are some rules of thumb that I follow:

- First, google the pronoun and see if you can't find a more extensive set of its forms somewhere. Or look for it in a pronoun collection, like [Wikipedia's](#) or [askanonbinary](#)'s [list](#). If possible, contact the pronoun's creator. Failing that…
- The first form listed is the subject form.
- The second form listed is the object form…unless it ends in -s, in which case it might be a possessive form instead.
- The form ending in -self is the reflexive form.
- If no form ending in -self is present, the reflexive form will probably be the object form with -self added at the end. E.g. hir –> hirself.
- If no more forms are listed, assume that the possessive adjective is identical to the object form, and that the possessive noun is the possessive adjective with an -s added to the end.
- If one possessive form is listed, and it ends in -s, it's probably the possessive noun. If it doesn't end in -s, then it's either the possessive adjective, or *both* possessives.

Confusing? Yes, I know. Sorry. It confuses me, too. I wish more people knew about this stuff so they could explain their pronouns better. (Hence why I wrote this essay.)

Here are a few pronouns that I found difficult when I saw them on askanonbinary's [excellent masterlist](#). I don't think these are *bad* pronouns, and I would like to be able to use them, but I would probably screw them up and misgender somebody by accident. I would have to contact the creators and ask them for more information before I could use these.

- hu / hu / hume / humeself
- whomp / whizz / whirr / whizelf
- bun / buns / bunself

hu/hu/hume/humeself - Okay, I get that hu wants me to call hu "hu." No problem. But do I say "these are hume pronouns," or "these are hume's pronouns"? Or "these are hu's pronouns"? Do I say "these are pronouns of hume," or "these are pronou[ns…]

SCROLL TO TOP

humes/hume's"? I can't tell whether "hume" is an adjective, noun or both. I don't know whether I should add an -s, -'s or nothing at the end of the possessive noun form.

whomp/whizz/whirr/whizelf - Same problem as above. Are these pronouns whirr, or whirrs, or whirr's? Also, I think that "whizz" is the object form, but since it sounds similar to "his" I don't know if it might actually be a possessive form - and if it is, I'm not sure how it would relate to "whirr."

bun/buns/bunself - Is "buns" an object form or a possessive form? What does the possessive adjective look like? Should I say that bun uses "bun pronouns" or "buns/bun's pronouns"?

I repeat, none of the above pronouns are bad, and I'm not saying they need to be changed. But I am saying that it would be easy for me to screw up when trying to use them, because not all of their forms are listed. If they were, I would have been able to learn and use these pronouns immediately, with no trouble.

(I should also add that it's not askanonbinary's fault that these forms are incomplete. Xe has made xir list as thorough as possible.)

When Creating a New Pronoun…

There are no real rules for what you should do, or what new pronouns should look like. The only thing that really matters is whether it makes you happy.

That said, if you create a pronoun that doesn't work with English grammar, people are going to mess it up a lot more often, and it will probably end up getting changed to be more like the common pronouns. You know how I said "one" is slowly falling out of use as a pronoun? Yeah, that's because it doesn't fit into the patterns that other English pronouns do. Languages change over time, and strange words that don't work like other words tend to get altered or forgotten.

So it's worth thinking about the variations of your pronoun:

- Subject form
- Object form
- Possessive adjective
- Possessive noun
- Reflexive form

For example, here is one possible set of forms for the pronoun "xe":

- Subject form - xe - "Xe thinks you are cute."
- Object form - xem - "I have seen xem."
- Possessive adjective - xir - "I found xir homework."
- Possessive noun - xirs - "This book is xirs."
- Reflexive form - xirself - "Xe looks at xirself in the mirror."

Not all people who use "xe" use these exact forms for it! I have also seen variants with xyr, hir, xyrself and xemself. So this is an example of why listing *all five* forms you prefer is a good idea.

It's not necessary for all five forms to be different. The common pronouns don't do that, after all:

- he / him / his / his / himself

AROMANTICISM
ASEXUALITY
TRANSGENDER
MY ESSAYS
GLOSSARY
HELP, ADVICE AND RESOURCES
WRITING ASEXUALITY IN FICTION
ABOUT

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- she / her / her / hers / herself
- it / it / its / its / itself

But if you make four or five of the forms different, then it will be easier for people to understand you when you use your pronoun in sentences.

At the very least, you should know what all five of your pronoun's forms are, and list them, so that people don't have to play the "guess the form" game I described in the previous section. You should also decide whether an apostrophe (') is present on your possessive noun form, e.g. xyrs vs. xyr's.

There are a few tricks you can use to make your pronouns easier to remember. These work by taking advantage of patterns that other English pronouns already use. You don't *need* to do any of these, they're just options that you have available.

- Making all of the forms start with the same letter or sound.
- Making the subject form end in a vowel or -y.
- Making the object form end in -r or -m.
- Making the possessive noun identical to the possessive adjective, but with an -s added to the end, and making it the *only* form ending in in -s.
- Making the reflexive form end in -self: himself, herself, emself, xirself, sierself, etc.

So, if you take all five forms into account, your pronoun should work just fine with English grammar, and you won't stumble over sentences and have to make up new forms of it on the fly.

Once again, you don't have to do any of this, and your personal comfort is more important than any of my advice. Feel free to disregard everything that I've said. But if I were making new pronouns for myself, this is how I would use linguistics to help work things out.

One Last Note

Congratulations for getting through this whole essay! Use your linguistic knowledge only for good. Please do not use my advice to tell other people that they're doing it wrong, or that their pronouns aren't very good. I have approached this subject in a technical, nerdy way, which might not be useful or interesting to everyone. Creating new words is an art, not a science, and it should be fun and relaxing, not stressful or competitive.

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TRANSGENDER
MY ESSAYS
GLOSSARY
HELP, ADVICE AND RESOURCES
WRITING ASEXUALITY IN FICTION
ABOUT

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SCROLL TO TOP

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AROMANTICISM
ASEXUALITY
TRANSGENDER
MY ESSAYS
GLOSSARY
HELP, ADVICE AND RESOURCES
WRITING ASEXUALITY IN FICTION
ABOUT

ARCHIVES
RSS

SEARCH

CASSADAGA THEME BY MBACANI

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SCROLL TO TOP