Using gender pronouns in digital communication
E-mail signature, UMployee, Canvas

Maastricht University (UM) is committed to fostering an inclusive community that respects the diversity of gender identities among our staff and students. Our Strategic Plan 2022-2026 highlights diversity and inclusion, sustainability, mutual respect, integrity, democratic principles and transparency as core values of our UM community. The use of inclusive language plays an important role in supporting these values, and we believe it is a shared responsibility to communicate in ways that actively welcome and affirm everyone at UM.

For many people, their gender identity is a deeply personal and fundamental part of who they are. Being misgendered—referred to with the wrong pronouns or gendered terms—can feel invalidating or disrespectful, even if it's unintentional. One simple yet meaningful way to contribute to a more inclusive work and study environment is to share our personal pronouns. Using the correct pronouns shows respect, helps prevent uncomfortable or hurtful situations, and contributes to a culture of belonging for everyone.

This document explains why sharing pronouns in digital communication is important for employees. It also provides step-by-step guidance on how to add pronouns to your e-mail signature and your profile on UMployee and Canvas.

What are gender pronouns?

Gender pronouns (e.g. she, he, they) are the words we use to refer to someone in place of their name. They also reflect one's gender identity. Just like using the correct name or title, using the right pronouns shows respect and helps facilitate an inclusive environment.

Gender (e.g. woman, man, genderqueer) refers to a person's internal sense of self—how they experience and express their identity. This is different from **sex** (female, male, intersex), which is typically assigned at birth and is based on physical and physiological characteristics such as chromosomes, reproductive anatomy or hormone levels.

Some people's gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Using the correct gender pronouns is especially meaningful for these individuals, as it affirms their identity and helps them feel acknowledged, included and valued.

Furthermore, some people identify outside the gender categories of 'man' or 'woman'. For example, individuals who identify as genderqueer—a broad term that may include non-binary or genderfluid identities—might not relate fully to either end of the gender spectrum. These individuals often use gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them/theirs in the singular form. For example, you might say: "I know Sam. They work in the Marketing and Communications Department. I enjoy working with them."

The most common gender pronouns are:
- she/her/hers
- he/him/his
- they/them/theirs

Other pronouns also exist, and some people use a combination (e.g. she/they or he/they) to indicate they're comfortable with more than one set. When you're unsure of someone's pronouns, the best approach is to ask politely and use them correctly moving forward.

To learn more, watch Sex and Gender: What?, Why?, and How?, a video by UMPride that outlines the differences between sex and gender and why they matter, also in research.

Why consider adding gender pronouns?

As sharing gender pronouns becomes more common in professional settings, it may spark questions such as: 'Why should I include my pronouns in my email signature if I'm not transgender or genderqueer?'

While sharing pronouns is often associated with transgender and genderqueer individuals, it's useful to remember that everyone uses pronouns. When deciding whether to share your pronouns, it is worth considering the following:

- **It normalises the practice for everyone.**
  When people of all gender identities share their pronouns, it helps normalise the practice. This reduces the pressure on transgender or genderqueer individuals to be the only ones doing so. It also encourages others to do the same, making inclusivity a shared practice.
- **It demonstrates allyship.**
  Including your pronouns—even if your gender is rarely misunderstood—signals support for transgender and gender-diverse colleagues and students. It shows you care about the inclusion of everyone.
- **It helps reduce assumptions based on appearance.**
  Even though it's sometimes possible to look up a photo online of people you don't know, it's not always safe—or respectful—to assume that's enough to know their gender identity. Sharing pronouns helps to avoid assumptions so people can be addressed in a way that affirms their identity.
- **It provides clarity when names are gender neutral.**
  Names like *Sam*, *Charlie*, *Robin* or *Noah* are used by people of all genders, which may lead to uncertainty. Including your pronouns removes ambiguity and helps avoid misgendering.
- **It eliminates ambiguity when names are culturally specific or unfamiliar in an international context.**
  In an international community like UM, names may carry different gender associations across cultures and languages. For example, Jan is typically a man's name in Dutch, but often a woman's name in English-speaking countries. Some names might also be unfamiliar or not easily recognisable across cultures. Including pronouns helps prevent confusion and potentially uncomfortable intercultural interactions.

It's also important to acknowledge that not everyone may feel comfortable sharing their pronouns, and that choice should be respected. If someone hasn't shared their pronouns and you are unsure of how to address them, using their name only is always a considerate option.

Sharing your pronouns is encouraged, but ultimately, it's a personal decision. Everyone has their own reasons for choosing whether to share them—and that's completely valid. An inclusive community is built on openness, mutual respect and a commitment to supporting each other's choices in ways that foster belonging and understanding.

If you do decide to share your pronouns, you can choose how you would like to display them—for example, 'she/her' or 'she/her/hers'. Both are correct; the longer version is often considered slightly more formal.

How to add gender pronouns to your e-mail signature

Maastricht University has outlined the essential components of the email signature to ensure a consistent and professional appearance. The standard signature includes general information (such as name, address, and position), the UM logo, and a disclaimer.

You can also include your gender pronouns in your email signature by following these steps:

1. In Outlook, go to File > Options > Mail > Signatures
2. Select the signature you want to edit, and then add your gender pronouns under your name in the 'Edit signature' box.
3. Click the 'Save' button when you're finished.
4. Click the 'OK' button to apply the changes.

You can even download the UM email signature template, which includes a designated space for gender pronouns.

Example:

Alex de Vries
She/Her
Policy Advisor Diversity & Inclusivity Office
firstname.lastname@maastrichtuniversity.nl
www.maastrichtuniversity.nl
Minderbroedersberg 4-6, room 0.103, 6211 LK Maastricht
P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands
T +31 43 XX XX XXX M +31 6 XX XX XXXX
Facebook | Instagram | Twitter | LinkedIn | YouTube

Extra line (optional)

Disclaimer https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/disclaimer-emails

If you are setting up your e-mail signature for the first time, please have a look at the following guides:

- Setting up an email signature in Microsoft Outlook (PC)
- Setting up an email signature in Microsoft Outlook (MAC)

How to add your gender pronouns to your profile on UMployee

UMployee is the web portal for the employees of Maastricht University that contains information about work, leave and career development.

Follow these steps to include your pronouns in your UMployee profile:

1. Click on 'My Account' (at the bottom right of the page).
2. Then click on 'Profile page'.
3. You can add your gender pronouns to the 'About myself' section.
4. Click the 'Save' button.

How to add your gender pronouns to your profile on Canvas

Canvas is Maastricht University's learning management system. If you are a UM employee who has access to Canvas, you can follow the steps below to include your pronouns in your Canvas profile:

1. Go to UM's Canvas portal and sign in with your credentials.
2. Click on the 'Account' icon in the global navigation menu on the left side of the screen.
3. Select 'Settings' from the dropdown menu.
4. On the Settings page, click the 'Edit Settings' button (usually located on the right side of the page).
5. Select 'Pronouns'.
6. In the Pronouns dropdown menu, choose your preferred pronouns from the available options.
7. Click the 'Update Settings' button to save your changes.

Check out: Video tutorial on how to add gender pronouns to your Canvas profile

Questions?

If you have any questions, need clarification or would like to provide feedback or share your thoughts, please feel free to contact us at diversity@maastrichtuniversity.nl.

Maastricht University Diversity & Inclusivity Office 2025