

Pronoun Usage: Gender and the Singular They

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are words that refer to people by replacing proper nouns, like nouns.¹ “A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (I or you) or someone or something that is being talked about (like she, it, them, and this). Gender pronouns (he/she/they/ze etc.) specifically refer to people that you are talking about.”²

In academic writing, pronouns do the work of indicating the gender of a person or scholar. The most common pronouns used are she/her/hers, he/him/his, and they/them/theirs. Traditionally, she/her/hers and he/him/his are masculine and feminine pronouns that are predominately used in writing as universal pronouns. However, the binary insisted by these sets of pronouns limits people’s writing in referring to scholars who you either do not know the gender of or do not identify with the gender-specific pronouns we commonly know. Understanding pronoun usage beyond he and she is useful in being more respectful towards people’s gender identities and expressions in writing and offers a tool to write more smoothly without assigning a masculine or feminine referent to someone. This handout will cover examples of different gender pronouns in their subjective, objective, possessive, reflexive, and possessive form and how to use the singular “they”.

Singular ‘They’

‘They’ as Gender-Neutral Pronoun

When the gender of a singular antecedent is unknown, or the gender of a singular scholar or person you are referring to is unknown, singular ‘they’ can be used as a universal pronoun. Commonly, the pronoun *they* refers to a plural antecedent but can be used as a singular pronouns.³ In the case where the gender of a person is unknown, writing or saying, “He or she was riding his or her bike” sounds more awkward than, “They were riding their bike”. Using the singular they as a universal pronoun also helps your writing become smoother. To use the singular they, follow these grammar guidelines.⁴

¹ Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/gendered_pronouns_and_singular_they.html.

² University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/?_ga=2.159914749.1956197401.1623718841-1819462732.1623718841#a2.

³ Chicago Manual of Style Shop Talk, http://cmosshoptalk.com/2017/04/03/chicago-style-for-the-singular-they/?_ga=2.43096997.183377545.1626969086-884749244.1626969086.

⁴ University of Wisconsin, Madison, https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/?_ga=2.159914749.1956197401.1623718841-1819462732.1623718841#a2.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive
She	Him	His	Himself
He	Her	Hers	Herself
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves

Subject: **They** laughed at the comedian.

Object: He tried to convince **them** that aliens do not exist.

Possessive: **Their** favorite food is pasta.

Possessive Pronoun: The table is **theirs**.

Reflexive Pronoun: **They** think highly of **themselves**.

The singular they is treated like a grammatical plural and takes plural verbs, much like the pronoun ‘you’. Example: He *has* a diploma vs. They *have* a diploma.

They as Preferred Gender Pronoun

They can also be used to refer to a specific person who does not identify with the gender-specific pronouns of *he* or *she*. Many people reject the standardized usage of *he* or *she* pronouns/referents in that they may identify as neither male/female. It is important to note that you cannot know the pronouns a person uses just by looking at them. Work to ask people their pronouns and use them correctly.

Isn't this incorrect grammar?

Grammar changes over time and many rules are arbitrary. Singular they is used conversationally and does not change the meaning of the sentence. Additionally, this way of writing and speaking (including presentations, etc.) is a way to be inclusive of all people in our language and not marginalize people based on their gender identity. This is especially important in the fact that our writing is shared, and all people should be comfortable in the classroom.

What if I make a mistake?

Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like “Sorry, I meant (insert pronoun)” If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on. Taking an active role in your classes, you may hear one of your students using the wrong pronoun for someone. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been misgendered. If other students or faculty are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let your student know that you are their ally. You may also ask them if you could speak to the person to remind them of your pronouns yourself. Everyone’s comfort in the classroom is important to keep in mind as part of this work on pronouns.

Tools to Help

If you are unsure of a scholar or person’s gender pronoun, you can look it up online or do some research on which pronouns they prefer.

Citations

All major citation systems accept singular they as a pronoun in formal and informal writing. Chicago Manual of Style, American Psychological Association, and Modern Language Association welcome the use of the universal pronoun for both singular and plural antecedents. All three advocate for the usage of people's preferred pronouns in all forms of writing.⁵

⁵American Psychological Association Style Guide, <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they>; Chicago Manual of Style Shop Talk, http://cmosshoptalk.com/2017/04/03/chicago-style-for-the-singular-they/?_ga=2.43096997.183377545.1626969086-884749244.1626969086; Modern Language Association Style Guide, https://style.mla.org/using-singular-they/?gclid=CjwKCAjwmqKJBhAWEiwAMvGt6DS_OSvu4e1Oku9Wm3zYAjLIw5gI4PSiDGJqmHfC_u1BXWbH8pTbvhoCXEoQAvD_BwE.