



## ***They* as a Singular Pronoun**

### **What's the debate?**

Maybe you've been told not to use *they* as a singular pronoun or had a red pen strike through your writing when you've written something like "When someone studies grammar, *they*...".

That's not surprising. There's a lot of debate about using *they* as a singular pronoun. Some people are fine with it, some encourage it, and some see it as a way to destroy the English language. Basically, there's a lot of disagreement, and all groups think they're right.

Here, we reveal some history behind *they* as a singular pronoun, explain which groups find it acceptable and why, and help you to think about whether you might use it in your writing.

### **Historical Precedent for a Singular *They***

The singular *they* isn't actually new. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the singular *they* showed up in writing in 1375—over 600 years ago! *The OED* also suggests the usage is even older since written language usually reflects trends already present in spoken language.

And it's worth noting that *you* and *your* had a somewhat similar history—but in reverse. *You* used to refer only to plural antecedents, not singular ones. In 1660, the founder of Quakerism even wrote a book about how using *you* as a singular pronoun was wrong ("A Brief History"). Yet since *you* is now, without any debate, used as a singular and plural pronoun, we can trust *they* is headed in a similar direction.

### **Scholarly and Professional Groups and the Singular *They***

Certain organizations are more open to the singular *they*, and some that were once opposed to the usage are softening their stance. It's worth keeping track of who allows the singular *they*, so here's a list of some notable groups in favor of it:



- The American Dialect Society, which honored the gender-neutral singular pronoun *they* as Word of the Year in 2015
- The International Writing Centers Association
- The National Council of Teachers of English
- *New Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage*
- *New Oxford American Dictionary*
- *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (which also uses the singular *they* in its definitions)
- *The Washington Post*

Some groups are becoming more open to the singular *they*—in specific instances:

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* has seen a dramatic shift in how its Usage Panelists view *they*. 40% of Panelists born after 1945 find the singular *they* acceptable. In contrast, only 4% of Panelists born prior to 1945 find the singular *they* acceptable.

The *Associated Press Stylebook* and *Chicago Manual of Style* permit the use of *they* as a singular pronoun only when referring to individuals who prefer that pronoun or when alternating gendered pronouns becomes awkward. These groups still don't encourage use of *they* in formal writing when it is possible to "write around" such usage.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA) have parallel recommendations and encourage writers to reserve *they* for plural antecedents or for individuals who use *they* as a preferred pronoun.

### **Advice for Writers**

Some argue that *one* should be the singular pronoun if people want to avoid using binary pronouns (i.e., *she*, *he*). But *one* can seem overly formal or stilted. And non-binary pronouns, though used more in recent years, are not yet very common in people's vocabulary. So that leaves us with *they*.

*They* has been in use as a singular pronoun for centuries, and even though language changes, this usage is sticking around—and getting more popular. As Fischietto notes

Opponents of the singular *they* are often linguistic prescriptivists who consider a language to have one correct form against which others are judged to be incorrect or inferior. The elevation of one form to the status of 'natural' or 'standard' fails to consider the way in which standards are created and reinforced by groups with political and social power as well as the evolutionary processes undergone by languages.



So if you want to use the singular *they* in your writing, have a conversation with your professors. Ask them how flexible they can be, especially when considering this long history and the emphasis on inclusivity when it comes to the singular *they*.

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