

The Use of Singular *They* in Professional Writing

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This literature review investigates the appropriateness of using singular they in professional writing. Although singular they has been used for centuries, there have long been disputes over whether or not it is considered proper usage. In this article, the author provides recent and accurate suggestions on whether or not singular they has come back into general usage by reviewing current style guidelines and recent studies conducted on specific and generic third person genderless pronoun usage in the English language. Based on the evidence presented in this literature review, it can be concluded that singular they is gaining traction in many circumstances and is acceptable for use in professional writing.

Whether you are aware of it or not, language plays a vital role in defining the human experience. What is said, how it is said, and the connotation of the words all have an effect on how a person's words are received and how the narration of existence is developed. This idea, the impact of language, has brought about the rules of language that are adhered to today. Most of the rules of language, specifically English, are followed without much thought, but within the last few decades, one particular rule has been called into question more than most. This sensitive subject is the banning of *they* as a genderless, singular pronoun.

When writing, especially in professional circumstances, correct grammar usage is vital if the writing is to be taken seriously. The process of developing a uniform language requires rules to be made about the language. The battle between those who wish to prescribe usage and those who believe in simply describing usage has been waged in the English language since its inception. One casualty of the current contention is singular *they*. When discussing the disagreement around this construction, there are many advantages and disadvantages that arise. After considering arguments from the feminist movement, the LGBTQ+ movement, the history and usage of *they* in written and spoken language, and modern style guide recommendations, I conclude that singular *they* is an appropriate construction that should be utilized in all settings including professional writing.

The History of Singular *They*

Before approaching the appropriateness of using *they* as a genderless singular pronoun, it is vital to understand why the argument exists at all. The history of this topic starts at the beginning of English itself and relies on the debate of prescriptivism versus descriptivism. Prescriptivism refers to when grammarians and language professionals prescribe, or tell, speakers of a language how they should speak that language. In contrast, descriptivism refers to when grammarians simply observe and describe how native speakers

naturally use the language. Both approaches are vital to the development of language, but the issue arises in situations, such as the use of singular *they*, where we question whether language should be prescribed or described.

English began to take shape in the fifth century when Germanic tribes came to England (Oxford International English Schools, 2020). The language evolved over many centuries, and there came a period where the scholars of the language worried about how quickly the changes were occurring, inspiring them to begin keeping track of what was deemed “proper” English. Linguistic scholars were soon separated into two camps: prescriptivists and descriptivists. Prescriptive scholars were in favor of creating dictionaries and rule books for the English language. They wanted to tell people how to properly speak the language. Descriptivists disagreed. They wanted to allow the language to develop on its own and then describe how people used it. Over the centuries these two schools of thought have both won and lost battles as evidenced by the many modern grammar dictionaries and style guides and the 520 new words added to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary just this year (Merriam-Webster, 2021). One topic that has recently reignited the conflict between language scholars is the usage of singular *they*.

They first appeared in written English language as a singular genderless pronoun in 1375, but most likely the construction had been employed in verbal speech long before it made its way into writing (OED Online, n.d.). From there it was used frequently and unspectacularly until the eighteenth century when prescriptivist grammarians decided that *they* as a plural pronoun should only be allowed to refer to plural antecedents (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). Part of what made the banning of singular *they* so unusual at the time was that the same prescriptivists were allowing singular *you* to pass by unnoticed. Until this point, *you* had been used exclusively as a plural pronoun like *they* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). However, just as *you* was becoming acceptable as a singular pronoun, *they* was shoved back

into its box of plurality. This meant that in the English language there was no third person, singular, genderless pronoun to be used in writing. Third-person options included *she*, *her*, *hers*, etc. for women, *he*, *his*, *him*, etc. for men, or *it*, *its*, etc. for nonhuman objects, but no pronoun for an unspecified, genderless, singular human.

Scholars then presented generic *he* as a solution to the problem by claiming that *he* already encompassed *she*. In 1850, this replacement was accepted as the official usage in an act of Parliament (Baranowski, 2002). Authors' need for a third-person, genderless, singular pronoun had been ignored, and they were now forced to either use generic *he* or change the sentence to passive voice if they wanted to comply with the regulations. Despite its prohibition, singular *they* was still a constant presence in verbal communication, and respected authors including Shakespeare, C.S. Lewis, and Oscar Wilde continued to employ the prohibited pronoun (Altieri, 2003). But, anyone who continued to use the singular *they* did it at great risk. The grammar books, dictionaries, and prescriptive literature then and now are so powerful that one small slip in writing has the power to discredit the work and education of the writer. To use singular *they* and ignore the prescriptivists' "proper English" guidelines essentially illustrated lack of intelligence—not something worth risking.

Advantages of Using Singular *They* in Professional Writing

Changing a language is not an easy feat; English has been evolving for centuries to get to the point it is at now. One impressive feature of many evolving languages is that they tend to keep or add aspects that are useful while the less useful parts are lost to time and niche dialects. Singular *they* is just one of these small aspects of language that is waiting for its sentencing: useful or not. While deciding whether singular *they* should be an acceptable construction in professional writing and English in general, it is important to

look at the advantages it will bring to the language. This section discusses the advantages of singular *they* found in recent research on spoken and written language, sexism, and gender inclusivity.

Singular *They* and Spoken and Written Language in Professional Contexts

As often happens with languages, certain words, phrases, and constructions are vocally used for many years before being written down. As previously mentioned, once language begins to be written down, there will be people who want to create rules for it. Thankfully, most people are unaware that this system exists, allowing our language to continue to develop and create discussions around aspects such as singular *they* (Altieri, 2003). While researching the acceptance of singular *they* usage into professional writing, three distinct advantages came to light.

One of the greatest advantages of accepting singular *they* is the fact that it is already in use, and has been in use for centuries, in informal English (Baranowski, 2002). Even today, despite the prescription, research done by Altieri demonstrates that singular *they* is often used in speech by the same people who will avoid its usage in their writing. Altieri discusses this dissonance by suggesting that people believe the rules of language apply in the same absolute way that the rules of mathematics do (2003). In mathematics, if you add two numbers, the result should always be the same; the laws are absolute and never changing. Language is not like this. The rules of language exist to provide organization and consistency, but these rules are constantly changing and updating to keep language usage consistent, not concrete. This is not the case, however, as while grammarians discount singular *they* due to its natural plurality, speakers of English have always used *they* to represent singular genderless antecedents when speaking and it is widely understood. Some writers' failure to use singular *they* is simply due to the prescription rules surrounding the construction. The most fatal mistake to make as a writer is writing something

that looks uneducated or even illiterate. This then makes challenging the rules of language even more difficult as doing so may create such a look. If the prohibition of singular *they* is to be thrown out, then many people will have to collectively take the risk. The only thing keeping English speakers and writers from utilizing singular *they* is those who define the rules around it. According to Altieri, it is up to English speakers to decide whether they will continue to listen to these rules or not (Altieri, 2003).

Another advantage of singular *they* is that it is still commonly used in speech. In these studies, verbal and written usage of singular *they* were researched to investigate the commonality of singular *they* in verbal communication despite its scarcity in written communication. In his study, LaScotte had native English speakers take a survey about language and then answer several free-response questions about “the ideal student” to collect information on which pronouns the respondents would use to refer to this singular, genderless antecedent. The majority of participants used singular *they* in their responses, but *he or she* was the top answer when they were asked which pronoun would be best for formal circumstances (LaScotte, 2016). In another study, Balhorn compares the usage rates of singular *they* to generic *he* and the alternative *he or she* by using examples from five newspapers. He relates the usage in each to a variety of factors and discovers that singular *they* is the preferred pronoun in the newspapers (Balhorn, 2009). What is especially interesting about this study is that the direct quotes in the newspapers used singular *they* 247 times while the text written by the journalists only used it 172 times (Balhorn, 2009). The difference between singular *they*’s usage in quotes versus written text illustrates that the prescription of singular *they* is the only thing keeping writers from using it in professional circumstances.

The advantage of using singular *they* is emphasized again in a study by Baranowski. Baranowski investigated the usage of singular *they* as it compares to other epicene pronouns—pronouns that have characteristics of both sexes or no characteristics of either sex—by using corpora of news articles.

The study found that *they* was the most popular pronoun and when compared with *he*, *they* was used significantly more times in all articles (Baranowski, 2002). The article concludes that there are now three main epicene pronouns that can be used, and singular *they* is the highest-ranking among them with generic *he* on its way out. Singular *they* is illustrated to be the most likely choice in all linguistic situations, so why is it not generally accepted and used in professional writing (Baranowski, 2002)?

Overall, the three advantages to accepting singular into professional writing and speaking contexts are that *they* has been used as a singular, genderless pronoun before, it is already commonly used in speech and other forms of writing despite its prohibition, and it is the most natural and popular choice in circumstances requiring singular, genderless pronouns. While investigating current spoken and written English, usage of singular *they* is obviously invaluable, but there are other factors that are also affecting the approval rates of this construction.

Singular *They* and Sexism in Professional Writing

In the 1970s, the prescriptions against singular *they* were challenged by the feminist movement (Altieri, 2003). As a part of the attack on male dominance, the movement vehemently denounced the generic *he* as sexist and exclusive of women. By using generic *he*, writers may have been accounting for the plurality of the antecedent but were ignoring the gender of the antecedent. The movement argued that this put men at the forefront of people's minds when speaking. It was during this time that singular *they* started to arise as an alternative that promoted equality (Altieri, 2003). Although the feminist movement had brought singular *they* back into the conversation as a viable option in writing, it was still regarded as a deadly sin by grammarians. This section discusses the advantages of allowing singular *they* to enter into professional writing as it relates to sexism.

In every professional circumstance, women benefit greatly from the usage of singular *they*. Without this genderless pronoun, workplaces would refer to their general

employee as *he*. Although generic *he* is said to encompass *she* as well, it does not. The generic *he* automatically generates a male connotation as it is used to specifically denote *male* when referring to a man, and thus allows businesses and other professional arenas to cater towards men and exclude women. This exclusion in language then makes it more difficult for women to gain the same status as men because they are linguistically at a disadvantage. By utilizing singular *they* in professional writing, women are now on the same level as men. In the article *To Each Reader His, Their or Her Pronoun*, Adami uses English Corpora to study generic *he* in academic writing, and by extension professional writing. Adami discusses how since *he* as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun has become inappropriate, other usage options, such as singular *they*, have become more prevalent. While this study finds singular *they* unlikely to be used in academic writing, it concludes that singular *they* is especially useful in areas where sex is irrelevant (Adami, 2009). In professional writing, there are many circumstances where sex is and should be irrelevant, making singular *they* a perfect choice.

In his article, Evan Bradley investigates the reasons why people are against using singular *they*, specifically sexism and grammatical prescription, to find out which is having more influence on the person's choice. The participants of the study were asked to rate sentences with varying pronoun uses, sentences that displayed benevolent or hostile sexism, and sentences that illustrated frequent grammatical beliefs. Based on these ratings, Bradley discovered that singular *they* is generally used if the antecedent is vague, but not if the antecedent is known, meaning that hesitation to use *they* as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun comes from both grammatical and gender conservatism (Bradley, 2020). This article illustrates that language helps define a person's world. For centuries, generic *he* has been the norm, and this has allowed unconscious sexism to enter into the views of English speakers. If singular *they* is accepted into the language and used more often, then people will unlearn sexist ideas that come from sexist language. By increasing experiences with singular *they*, speakers will become more

comfortable with gender equality. By adding singular *they* into the English language, grammarians will be helping women gain rightful equality with men by dissolving linguistic sexism. A similar area that is having a great effect on the reintroduction of singular *they* into the English language is gender inclusivity.

Singular *They* and Gender Inclusivity in Professional Writing

In the early 2000s, there came a wave that would push singular *they* into the spotlight and force prescriptivists to start grappling with the situation: the LGBTQ+ movement. During this time, LGBTQ+ groups became more outspoken about the discrimination they were facing, and they pushed for inclusiveness. The issue was—and is—that a large part of the community doesn't identify with the biological gender they were born with or, for some, any binary gender at all. While before grammarians were only dealing with unspecified genderless antecedents matching a pronoun, there were now definite genderless antecedents that needed pronouns to allow for nonbinary persons to be included. Singular *they*, while most commonly used as a pronoun to refer to an unspecified genderless antecedent such as “the perfect student,” can also be used to refer to a definite and gender-specific person who does not identify as male or female. As members of the movement began to choose *they/ them* as their preferred pronouns, singular *they* was once again brought into the light as an issue that grammarians had to address.

The research done by Bradley exhibits advantages of singular *they* in terms of gender inclusivity as well as gender equality. Bradley reminds readers that although *they* is beginning to be accepted in some circumstances, there is no definite, gender-neutral, third-person pronoun in English that is acceptable to use in all professional writing (Bradley, 2020). To study the reason for this gap, Bradley researched how people reacted to singular *they* being used as a pronoun for a specific individual. Before starting the research, Bradley took a poll of the participants and discovered that out

of the 250 respondents that completed the study, 57 percent had known or met someone who used gender-neutral pronouns such as *they/them* (Bradley, 2020). This high level of interaction with individuals who use nonstandard pronouns showed a strong relationship with the grammatical ratings of sentences including nonstandard pronoun usage. The more experience a participant had with singular *they* as a personal pronoun, the more likely the participant would accept a sentence that uses it as grammatically correct (Bradley, 2020). Another important discovery in this paper was that the sexism scores found were clearly broken up by the personal gender of the participant. Nonbinary participants' responses exhibited the least amount of sexism, followed by women. Men came in far last with the highest amounts of sexism displayed (Bradley, 2020). This once again illustrates the advantage of using singular *they* as those who used it more often, female and nonbinary participants, are proven to be less sexist and more inclusive of all genders.

Pauwels and Winter conducted a study to examine the effects of using singular *they* in the classroom. English teachers are among the many professionals struggling to know if singular *they* is appropriate to use (Pauwels, 2006). These teachers are under a lot of pressure to teach students correct grammar principles and to nurture them emotionally. With the current debate over singular *they*, it is difficult to know what to do since supporting a student by using preferred pronouns would contradict what is being taught in the classroom. Likewise, what is being taught in the classroom could be mentally and emotionally harmful for a nonbinary learner. In the article, research is presented on 20 personal interviews and 182 survey responses from English teachers (Pauwels, 2006). The study was focused on the teachers' opinions and use of pronouns such as generic *he*, generic *she*, *he or she*, and singular *they*. Teachers reported that they used gender-inclusive language, such as singular *they* and *he or she* both inside and outside the classroom and researchers found that there was a large preference for singular *they*. Singular *they* was reportedly commonly heard in speech and surprisingly,

commonly seen in formal writing. Despite this usage by the teachers, singular *they* only had a 62 percent approval for students, and more teachers said they would correct the construction rather than ignore it (Pauwels, 2006). This study illustrates that the double standard held for English students today is enforced by educators. While the teacher may consistently use singular *they* in speech and writing, the student must not. This creates unnecessary confusion in the language for all concerned while also potentially harming the students who identify with nonconforming pronouns by perpetuating homophobic attitudes. The clear advantage of accepting singular *they* here is the acknowledgment of nonbinary individuals and the addition of gender inclusivity to the language and professional writing.

Lastly, a study done by Bjorkman sets out that an important advantage of accepting singular *they* is that it is already a word used in English. This advantage was previously noted, but in this separate context, allowing singular *they* into the language would include allowing the construction to refer to definite genderless individuals and not just hypothetical ones. Here, instead of grammarians needing to create and disburse an entirely new word to relate to those who are nonbinary, they would just have to allow the usage of singular *they* into professional writing to expand to what it already is in speech (Bjorkman, 2017).

As illustrated, there are many advantages to accepting singular *they* into professional writing as it relates to gender inclusivity. Not only will the language become more inclusive, but so will mindsets. Allowing singular *they* into English as not only a generic genderless pronoun, but also a specific genderless pronoun will help clarify usage for educators and students, bring inclusivity to writing and language, and help actively reform sexist and homophobic views. By including singular *they* in professional writing and becoming more comfortable with all forms of singular *they*, we will be able to accept, include, and love all those around us more fully.

Disadvantages of Using Singular *They* in Professional Writing

Despite these advantages, there are still some arguments against using the singular *they* in professional writing. The greatest disadvantage for using singular *they* in written and spoken language will always be the long-lasting prohibition of it. Baranowski reminds readers that not long ago in a corpus of 108 sources, researchers found absolutely no instances of singular *they*. Through the years singular *they* has slowly been returning to the language, but Baranowski's study discovered that singular *they* is often passed up for *he* or *she* due to its severe prohibition (Baranowski, 2002). If singular *they* was accepted into the language it would take a long time for writers to adopt the new rule and get used to seeing the usage. Even though authors admit that *he* or *she* is more awkward and difficult to use than singular *they*, they continue to stick to the arbitrary rules in order to be accepted.

Another disadvantage of using singular *they* is discussed in an article from 2007 by Sanford and Filik. In this article the authors discuss how using singular *they* affects a reader's ability to process language. The study had 36 native English-speaking University students read passages using different antecedents and pronouns. Participants then responded to comprehension questions about the passages while having their eye movement tracked. The study discovered that pronouns and antecedents with mismatched number and gender created longer processing times (Sanford, 2007). This illustrates the difference between a spoken singular *they* and a written one. In speech, singular *they* is often used as naturally as any other pronoun. Due to its prohibition in writing, it is slightly more difficult to understand the mismatched gender or number when reading—a distinctly negative effect.

These disadvantages, while few in number, require reflection for all prescriptivists and writers when deciding on the appropriate usage of the singular *they*. It would be easy to think these difficulties could quickly disappear as the construction becomes more normal and accepted. For now

though, as the ultimate goal of language is to express ideas and communicate meaning, constructions that confuse readers and go against the standards for language are disfavored.

Current Style Guidance

The research presented in this review has all been done within the last two decades and adds vital information to the conversation on singular *they*. This research is what builds the foundation and gives the evidence needed to encourage the updating of style guides. When discussing whether singular *they* is appropriate to use in professional writing today, however, it is the style guides that hold the majority of the weight. Adami's article stated the importance of following style guides and prescriptions in writing for academic purposes and cited this as the reason why more gender-inclusive pronouns have not yet entered the sphere of professional writing (2009). In 2020, research done by Charlotte Stormbom on singular *they* usage found that the most commonly used pronoun in international academic articles was singular *they*, but that there were rarely any style guides that mentioned gender-inclusive language preferences (2020). Now in 2021, just a year later, style guidance has changed. This section will review the most recently available style guidance from the Modern Language Association (MLA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) to give the most up-to-date recommendations on the use of singular *they*.

Modern Language Association on Singular *They*

On March 4, 2020, the MLA posted a blog titled "How Do I Use Singular *They*?" This post began by addressing the use of singular *they* as a pronoun for nonbinary individuals. MLA states that writers should always follow the preferred personal pronouns of the people they are writing about and thus it accepts singular *they* as a specific genderless pronoun. In a second section, the guide references the use of singular *they* as a generic genderless pronoun. While MLA

has previously discouraged this use of singular *they* because of the lack of number agreement, it now welcomes and “encourages” the use of singular *they* to promote inclusion in formal writing. Despite MLA clearly accepting the construction of singular *they*, the rest of the article gives suggestions on how to revise sentences to avoid using it (MLA Style Center, 2020). This simple web page illustrates that although MLA has accepted singular *they* there are still preferences against it.

American Psychological Association on Singular *They*

On October 31, 2019, with a similar style blog post entitled “Welcome, Singular *They*,” the APA style guide also demonstrates its acceptance of the long-prohibited construction. The post begins by clearly stating that singular *they* is now accepted and considered “good practice” in formal writing (Lee, 2019). APA’s reasoning for accepting singular *they* is that by using *he or she* there is still a wide range of genders being excluded. In the APA’s examples, singular *they* is now seen as acceptable to use as a pronoun for a specific gender nonbinary person and for a generic genderless third person. The guide even explicitly states that writers must use a person’s preferred pronoun even if the writer doesn’t approve of it (Lee, 2019). This is a telling example of how the LGBTQ+ movement has been able to further the acceptance of singular *they*.

Chicago Manual of Style on Singular *They*

Unlike the aforementioned style guides that have more recently accepted singular *they*, CMOS has been changing its stance on the issue of singular *they* since the CMOS 17 version was announced in 2017. CMOS has taken a similar stance as the other guides on the use of *they* as a personal pronoun: preferred personal pronouns, including *they* must be used (CMOS Online, n.d.). In other situations of singular *they*, however, the guide is less generous. CMOS recommends avoiding singular *they* at all costs and gives nine revision suggestions to do so (CMOS Online, n.d.).

The guide specifically states that although singular *they* is becoming popular, under its guidance, it is not acceptable to use in formal writing (CMOS Shop Talk, 2017). Although CMOS does not fully accept singular *they* in all its constructions yet, it is clear that times are changing, and the guide is reluctantly evolving with them.

While all style guides now champion the usage of singular *they* as a specific genderless pronoun, not all of them are fond of using singular *they* as a generic genderless pronoun. These changes have all been very recent and it may take some time before singular *they* is fully incorporated into the English language, but it is safe to say that using it in professional writing is now acceptable and even encouraged by many modern style guides.

Conclusion

As is the case with many linguistic constructions, the writer must make the ultimate decision of whether or not to use singular *they*. This article gives solid evidence for the acceptance of singular *they* as a useful and often correct construction, but it also comes with some drawbacks. In general singular *they* is a beneficial construction since it is already widely used in speech and writing as the most popular epicene pronoun. In situations of gender inclusivity and equality, singular *they* is celebrated as it includes women and those in the LGBTQ+ community while simultaneously reducing sexism and homophobia. Accepting singular *they* also makes the lives of all English speakers easier as it removes the confusion around its usage. In situations of conservative prescriptivism, it is discouraged due to the mismatching gender and number that can make it difficult to understand in reading. In the case of style guides, many have chosen to accept singular *they* in all its forms while some specifically request that it be avoided as much as possible. Future research should be done on the disadvantages of accepting singular *they* into the English language. This article reviewed recent studies according to the criteria mentioned, but few had any negative suggestions towards

accepting the construction. This lack of disadvantages represents a gap in current knowledge that could vastly change the acceptance of singular *they*. Overall, this research illustrates that singular *they* is again gaining traction in the English language and becoming largely acceptable.

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