

Everybody Has Their Own Opinion About the Singular *They*

BY JOHN LAWLER

Ellie Sommer, editorial director, Center for Applications of Psychological Type, writes:

“Grammar, Anyone?” is a great addition to *The Editorial Eye*! Thank you so much! I look forward to future columns.

Would you ask Professor Lawler to expound on the fascinating history of *they*, *them*, and *their* as gender neutral singular pronouns? Personally, I think we should re-adopt this old English style and do away with what I understand to be a Latin rule of grammar that was incorrectly applied to the English language. And think of how easy political correctness would be: no more he or she, or one, or individual, which can certainly make sentences heavy and cumbersome for the reader.

I look forward to his comments, especially since those who choose to use such construction keep good company with some very important literary figures, or so I have read.

Thank you for the kind words, Ellie. We try.

As to your request, you seem to have already done your homework on the topic. Yes, you’re correct. One finds thousands of uses of singular *they*

(*their*, *theirs*, *them*) in the very best writing in Modern English, from Caxton, Shakespeare, and the King James Bible at the beginning of the period to Edith Wharton, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, and Doris Lessing in the last century, with (to name only a few) Fielding, Goldsmith, Byron, Austen, Eliot, Bagehot, Whitman, Ruskin, Carroll, Thackeray, and Shaw in between.

Nevertheless, many usage guides, including the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the American Psychological Association’s *Publication Manual*, treat the singular *they* as a solecism and profess to be shocked, shocked! that it manages to find its way into print regardless.

And what is singular *they*? Well, when a pronoun’s antecedent is not *referential*, one usually can’t specify what its gender should really be. The technical term here is a *non-specific indefinite*, a noun phrase which, rather than referring to a specific individual, either refers to some unspecified person or doesn’t have any

referent at all. It may have no gender at all, like *nobody*; refer to either gender like *somebody* or *anybody*; or include both genders, like *everybody*.

But English has no singular personal pronoun that does not specify gender, so it just feels wrong to a lot of people to say (or write)

No *editor* enjoys finding a typo in *his* publication.
let alone

No *editor* enjoys finding a typo in *his or her* publication.
And that leads naturally to

No *editor* enjoys finding a typo in *their* publication
because, unlike singular personal pronouns, plurals don’t specify gender in English.

There are several issues here. For starters, let’s be clear that singular *they* is a normal part of Modern English. It’s such an obvious solution to the unspecified gender pronoun problem that English speakers

continue to discover it on their own as they have for centuries, and it’s sanctified as well by wide use in speech and literature. So the problem, if it is a problem, occurs *only* in writing.

And only in *some* writing at that, since great authors apparently use singular *they* with impunity like other English speakers. It’s only those writers constrained for one reason or another

to follow such rules (like psychology professors, who have to publish in journals that follow APA style) upon whom the full force of the ban falls. If there were a good reason for such a ban, one might expect the quality of writing in such journals to be higher than that found elsewhere; but inspection does not, alas, support such a conclusion.

CMS and APA both maintain that singular *they* is “ungrammatical.” As usual, such blanket prohibitions about English grammar and usage tend not to pay

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much attention to the facts. Singular *they* is ungrammatical when used with a referential antecedent, whether its gender is determinate or not; for instance, suppose someone you don't know named *Jan* has left you a note; you would be wrong to say or write

Jan left me a note saying *they'll* be back tomorrow even though you don't know whether Jan is male or female, because *Jan* is a referential noun and singular *they* is only grammatical with a non-referential antecedent. On the other hand, you would be correct to say or write, in the same circumstances,

Somebody named "Jan" left me a note saying *they'll* be back tomorrow

because *somebody* is a non-specific indefinite.

This is a grammatical rule, and it has grammatical constraints: it applies only in certain grammatically describable conditions, and not in others. That is the essence of what it means to *be* a grammatical rule. The rule that's pushed by *CMS* and *APA* has no basis in fact, but is rather part of the catechism of shibboleths first promulgated by Bishop Lowth in the late eighteenth century, when the upper cohorts of British clergy, armed

with classical educations, quaint ideas about the relation of dialect, class, and moral behavior—and entirely too much time on their hands—attempted to reform the speech of the middle classes by laying down the Latinate law. The result is as you see.

Nowadays what one really wants from a pronoun in writing is not social uplift but rather a word that readers can zip over rapidly, with just enough referentiality to point to the proper individual without distracting anyone from what the writer wants them to be thinking about. That's why we use pronouns instead of full descriptions in the first place, and that's what's so awful about recent politically correct competitors proposed to replace singular *they*, like *he or she*, *s/he*, and *hir*. Stumbling over one of these is guaranteed to derail any train of thought, whereas a properly deployed *they* just sounds and soothes like ordinary language. Singular *they* won the competition long ago, and anybody that maintains otherwise doesn't really know what they're talking about. ♦

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Black Eyes

- From a McDonalds paper bag, on which "Lovin' it" is printed in many languages, one of them pidgin French:
C'est ca que j'm
- From assembly instructions for a bookcase, the final advice:
All you need is a philips screwdriver and a hammer. (Or whatever tools are required.)
- From the last of six assembly instructions for a storage shelf:
Step 6: Repeat step 6 for the remaining shelves.
- From a local television news broadcast reporting on a jury trial:
Spilt Verdict
- From an AWWA chapter newsletter, a headline:
Don't Miss Keynote Speaker Lt. Governor Kathy Davis
—sent by Gay Porter De Nileon, Opflow editor, AWWA, Denver, CO, who wondered, "When the keynote speaker isn't Davis, who is it?"
- From a statement by China on terrorism:
The Chinese government firmly opposes and condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and actively takes actions to prevent and combat all terrorist activities.
—Dan Philbin, dan.philbin@hq.afis.osd.mil, **need his source, title, location**
- From a Sports Authority advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune*:
Not liable for pricing, typographical and printing errors or emissions
—Jill Hronek, director of communications, The Sherwood Group, Inc., Northbrook, IL
- From *the Harvard Health Letter*:
Recent research has sewed a little doubt about flossing.
—Glen Ellard, TK, TK
- From a short story in the *New Yorker* magazine, in a description of a fight between two guys:
Pain lanced through his muddle
—Ruth Thaler-Carter, writer-editor, Rochester, NY