Eschew Obfuscation: He, She … And They by Faye Roberts

Back in grammar school you were probably introduced to pronouns. They're the useful words that stand for nouns, as indicated by their name (pro + noun).

Personal pronouns come in one of three flavors (persons), depending on the individuals to whom they refer.

First-person pronouns refer to the speaker.

- Singular: I, me, mine

- Plural: we, us, ours

Second-person pronouns refer to the reader or listener and are the same, whether singular or plural.

- Singular: you, yours

- Plural: you, yours

Third-person pronouns refer to other people or things.

- Singular: he, him, his; she, her, hers; it, its

- Plural: they, them, theirs

Personal pronouns are especially useful for clearer, cleaner writing. (From this point on, these personal pronouns will be underlined in this column for emphasis and easy recognition.)

As an example of pronoun usefulness, consider this unwieldy sentence that lacks personal pronouns: *Dave asked Nikki if Dave could park Dave's car at Nikki's house while Dave was on vacation.*

With personal pronouns to the rescue, we can have a more understandable sentence: *Dave asked Nikki if he could park his car at her house while he was on vacation.* In this revised version, the personal pronouns *he*, *his*, and *her* allow us to avoid repeating the actual names. The antecedents of the pronouns—the names *Dave* and *Nikki*—are given at the beginning of the sentence so it's clear to whom the pronouns refer. The result is a shorter, less awkward statement.

Whether a pronoun is singular or plural determines the verb form it needs. For example, these familiar singular pronouns take the singular forms of verbs:

- I run; you run; he, she, or it runs

- I cook; you cook; he or she cooks (but it probably does not cook.)

Note that the third person singular (he, she, it) takes a slightly different verb form, typically a form ending in *s*.

He and *she*, of course, are gender-specific pronouns. They're used when the gender of the person referenced is known. Gender-specific pronouns are even used for animals when the gender is known. *It* is employed for inanimate objects.

For many years, *he* was recommended as the catch-all pronoun when referring to someone whose gender was unknown: *Each student should put his books in his locker*.

For lots of reasons—including gender sensitivity, women's rights, and a general sense of fair play—the constant use of *he* became a problem in everyday speech. Instead, we often hear—and say—sentences such as: *Each student should put their books in their locker.*

The gender-neutral use of the singular *they* happened because the "correct" form (e.g., he and/or she) was cumbersome. Many conscientious writers, in an effort to be grammatically correct, have struggled with awkward constructions like these:
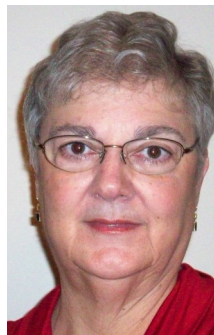
- *Each student should put his or her books in his or her locker.*

More creative and labored versions followed, such as

- *Each student should put his/her books in her/his locker.*

- *S/he should put her/his books in her/his locker.*

With all this going on, the singular *they* started looking good.

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

Prescriptivist grammarians—hard-liners when it comes to following prescribed rules—have been slow to warm to the idea of *they* used in the singular fashion. The rule-followers argued that using *they, them,* and *their* in a singular context was just wrong. Some thought that employing the singular *they* was merely a modern concession to political correctness.

Using *they* in this way has actually been around for centuries, even though it has not been considered appropriate for formal writing. As evidence, take just one example: the website [Everybody Loves THEIR Jane Austen.](#) Here you can find quite a collection of examples of this singular use from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, all written more than 200 years ago. Later on, though, influential grammar teachers took a firm stand against using *they* any time except when referring to a plural subject.

It's also ironic, for a totally different reason, that so many have had difficulty accepting the singular *they*. From the top of this column, in the list of personal pronouns, you may recall that second-person pronouns are the same whether single or plural: *you, yours*. We're quite comfortable using *you* to refer either to a single individual or to a group. If *you* can play two roles, surely *they* should be up to the job as well.

Just as singular pronouns take singular verbs, so do plural pronouns—*we*, *you,* and *they*—take plural verbs:

- We run; you run; they run

- We cook; you cook; they cook

The singular *they*—like the singular *you*—takes the plural form of the verb.

In recent years, the singular *they* gained a lot of attention. In fact, the American Dialect Society chose the singular *they* as its word of the year for 2015. That same year *The Washington Post* endorsed its use, but suggested writers try to avoid it, if possible.

Singular *they* is still not universally endorsed for formal writing. The venerable *Chicago Manual of Style*, in its 17th edition, discourages use of the singular *they* as a general rule—but authorizes it when referring specifically to someone who does not identify
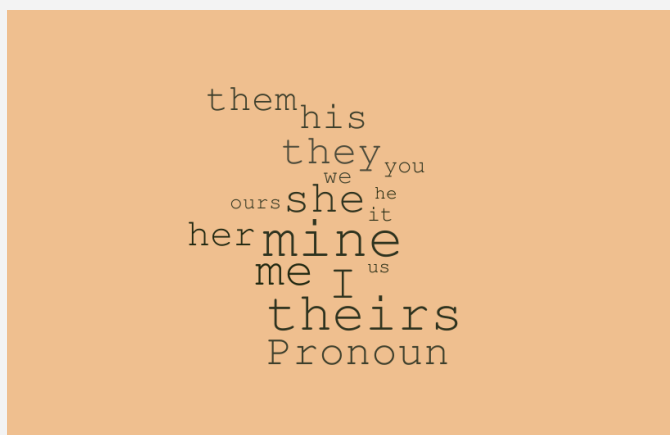
Resources

Want to know more about the singular they? Gael Spivak has compiled [a long list](#) of articles on the subject. You'll find they make interesting reading.

with a gender-specific pronoun. In such cases *they* and *its* forms (e.g., their, theirs, them, and themselves) are preferred as are the pronouns those individuals select for *themselves*.

Bryan A. Garner, who wrote the chapter on grammar and usage in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, is recognized as a conservative authority on the subject. He also wrote *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation,* in which he offers a range of techniques for achieving gender neutrality in your writing. Garner's suggestions include omitting the pronoun or repeating the noun. Another possibility is to use a plural antecedent, e.g., instead of *Each runner should display their badge (*or *his and her badge)*, it's possible to say *Runners should display their badges.* Still another approach is to use what's known as the "imperative mood," e.g., instead of *Each teacher should arrange for his or her substitute*, you could simply say "*Arrange for your substitute."*

Wondering if we've done an article about a specific writing topic? There very well may be one.

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