

The Singular “They”

Due to the growing awareness that not everyone ascribes to the gender traditionally associated with their biological sex, assuming someone else’s gender based on their name or appearance is increasingly considered presumptuous, unthoughtful, or inconsiderate.

As such, the pronoun “they,” which is commonly associated with plural antecedents, is becoming/has become the most accurate and efficient pronoun for referring to a single actor from a general noun class like “doctor,” “landowner,” or “tenant,” because “they” is more accurate than “he or she,” more efficient than “he, she, or they,” and definitely less hierarchical than both.

The use of the singular “they” is, in fact, so common for referring to general nouns that we often use it without notice:

- “As a witness, a doctor must offer only their professional opinion.”
- “When I forgot my phone, my cousin lent me theirs.”
- “The speaker offered their opinion on the housing crisis.”

The singular “they” is also fast becoming the best pronoun to account for not only those singular people who identify as neither male nor female but also those situations where one must refer to someone without knowing in advance that person’s gender.

- “Ryan uses the typewriter left to them by their grandmother.
- “Please ask the student to bring their transcripts with them.”

Every reader has their own preferences as to what creates the most clarity and accuracy in writing, and my primary rule for writers is that one should identify and write for one’s audience. Therefore, the writer’s duty is to discern and fulfill the preferences of their intended audience. If that audience, then, is likely to disagree with or be confused by the use of the singular “they,” the writer should then either avoid using that pronoun or make explicitly clear in their text that “they” refers to a singular antecedent.

In the first scenario, one might simply rely on plurals to avoid identifying gender:

- “Artists must often rely on their intuition.”
- “Nurses must take their time with their patients”

In the latter scenario, the writer might simply make clear their subject prefers the plural pronoun:

- Ashleigh, who identifies as “they,” brought their case before the court.

To avoid any potential confusion when using a singular “they,” however, an author should—such as with any other pronoun—make certain that no other potentially correct antecedent appears closer to that “they” than its actual intended antecedent.

- Ashleigh believes the doctors misread their diagnosis.

A writer should also not use the singular “they” when referring to singular person whose gender is known and who does not identify as “they.”

Likewise, the singular “they” is also incorrect if its antecedent is a singular inanimate object like “a pencil,” an institution like “the court,” or a noncount noun like “water” or “traffic.” In each of those cases, “it” would be the correct pronoun.