Pronoun Issues in Gender-Neutral Writing
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Gender-neutral is the academic and professional standard...

- Purdue Owl: for business writing “Use Nondiscriminatory Language” includes “do not use masculine pronouns.”
  - [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/652/01/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/652/01/)
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...but English (kinda) doesn’t have a good singular, gender-neutral, third-person pronoun/possessive for humans.
Options for singular, gender-neutral, third-person pronouns/possessives for humans in English:

• “one”—except it sounds overly formal to present-day ears and does not work well with an antecedent:
  • “One does not simply...” Yes.
  • “When a writer proofreads, one must...” No.

• “they”—except it has been declared plural-only by many style guides.
  • “Will the person with the Honda parked outside please turn their lights off?” Yes? No?
    • We use this all the time in informal speech. Is it ok for formal writing?
A Big Year for the Singular They


January 2016: over 200 linguists gather at the American Dialect Society and declare singular they the word of the year.

- [http://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they](http://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they)

What about the style guides?

- Chicago: acknowledges singular they is increasingly acceptable, but does not endorse. [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Pronouns/faq0017.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Pronouns/faq0017.html)


- MLA: ???
Singular They: Pro/Con

PRO: The singular “they” has a long, prestigious, continuous history in English.

• “There’s not a man I meet but doth salute me/As if I were their well-acquainted friend.” Shakespeare, The Comedy of Errors

• “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” King James Bible

• “I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt.” Austen, Pride and Prejudice.

• “Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the position of the planets at their moment of birth.” Rowling, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.
Singular They: Pro/Con

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PRO: It’s inclusive.

CON: A lot of people feel it just doesn’t sound right.
Replacing the Singular They

Make the sentence plural:
• “When a writer proofreads, they must...”
• “When writers proofread, they must...”

CON: Doesn’t work in all sentences:
• Chicago Manual example: “Someone ate my twinkie, and they’d better watch out!”
Replacing the Singular They

Use new gender-neutral pronouns/possessives (hir, ze):

• “When a writer proofreads, they must…”
• “When a writer proofreads, ze must…”

PRO: Easy. Inclusive.

CON: Still so unconventional that it’s problematic for any context in which conventions are important.

from askanonbinary@tumblr.com:

Q: “how do you pronounce the ze/hir pronouns?”
A: “Basically any way you’d like”
Replacing the Singular They

Use she/he or s/he:
• “When a writer proofreads, they must…”
• “When a writer proofreads, s/he must…”

PRO: Easy.
CON: Not inclusive of non-binary people. Sounds awful.
Replacing the Singular They

Use “she”:
• “When a writer proofreads, they must...”
• “When a writer proofreads, she must...”

PRO: Easy. “Nobody will get mad at you.”
CON: Like “he,” not actually gender-neutral.
Replacing the Singular They

Use “she”:
• “When a writer proofreads, they must...”
• “When a writer proofreads, she must...”

PRO: Easy. “Nobody will get mad at you.”
CON: Like, “he,” not actually gender-neutral.
• “If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans.” Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*
Replacing the Singular They

Use “she”:
• “When a writer proofreads, they must...”
• “When a writer proofreads, she must...”

PRO: Easy. “Nobody will get mad at you.”
CON: Like, “he,” not actually gender-neutral.
• “If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans.” Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*
• “She was probably male...” Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*
Replacing the Singular They

Alternate “she” and “he” when referring to multiple individual people.

PRO: Easy. Sounds good.

Tip: If you go with this strategy, use “she” first.
Replacing the Singular They

Rewrite the sentence to eliminate pronouns and possessives:

- “When a writer proofreads, they must…”
- “When proofreading, the writer must…”

PRO: Inclusive. Sounds good if done well.
CON: Usually more work than the other options. Sounds bad or lacks clarity if done poorly.