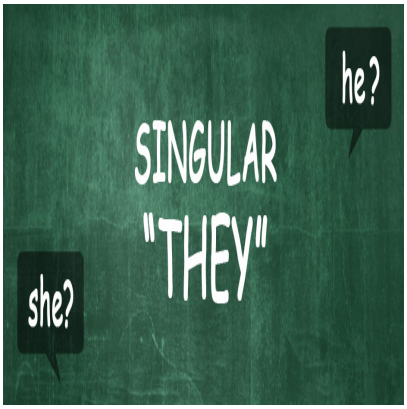


Description

Choosing the right pronoun for instances where a person's gender is unknown or does not conform to the social norms is a topic that has been much discussed and debated. English grammar books explain that English only has the gendered pronouns *he* and *she* to refer to an individual in the third person. (The gender-neutral word *it* is only used for animals or objects; it would be impolite to call a person *it*.)



This poses a problem in several scenarios. For example, consider that you wish to quote an anonymous survey respondent in your research article. If the respondent's gender is not reported, should you call the person *he* or *she*? Would the pronoun *they* suffice in this context, even though *they* is usually described as the third person plural? Other times, you may wish to write abstractly about *someone* or *anyone*. You might also want to refer to each individual in a large group that consists of both men and women. Should you talk about *he*, *she*, or *they*?

Older texts are likely to use "*he"* in such instances. For example, it is common to see sentences like "Every lawyer should bring his briefcase." Contemporary style guides and editors tend to recommend *he or she*, although *they* is quite common, especially in informal contexts and spoken conversation. This article explains the background of the issue as well as current perspectives.

Traditional View and Existing Guidelines

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Past generations were taught to default to the masculine pronoun *he*, called the "generic" or "neutral" *he*. The idea was that the generic *he* could represent either a male or female person. This resulted in sentences such as "Every lawyer should bring his briefcase," as mentioned above. As a result of feminist objections, however, since the 1960s and 1970s, writers have increasingly used the phrase *he or she*. This phrase explicitly acknowledges the possibility of either a male or female person as the referent.

He or she is the phrase currently recommended by APA and The Chicago Manual of Style when avoidance strategies are insufficient. This is explained in further detail below.

Contemporary Perspectives: Singular *they* vs. *he or she*

Linguists point out that the pronoun *they* is, in fact, a third person *singular* form widely used in colloquial English when a person's gender is unknown or simply unspecified, tracing the usage back several centuries (Grey, 2015). In casual conversation, you would sound perfectly natural saying "Somebody forgot their coat."

The American Dialect Society drew attention to this fact by recognizing the gender-neutral, singular *they* as the "word of the year" for 2015 and has also noted its acceptance by the Washington Post style guide.

As APA blog writer Chelsea Lee points out, researchers in gender studies may object to the binary way of thinking that underlies the phrase *he or she*. Indeed, some transgender or gender non-conforming individuals may specifically ask to be referred to as *they*. If *they* is to be used in this way, it is a good idea to give a brief explanation (e.g., "Casey prefers the pronoun 'they'") so that readers do not feel confused.

However, in academic settings overall, using *they* as a singular form remains a matter of debate. Prestigious journals and publishers prefer traditional grammar and are likely to follow the advice of specific style guides. Therefore, despite the arguments in favor of allowing singular *they*, editors will probably revise sentences to avoid it or recommend the phrase *he or she*.

APA recommends avoiding the problem by changing sentences to the plural or eliminating the pronoun altogether. For example, sentence (1) can be revised to (2):

- Each participant returned his portfolio.
- The participants returned their portfolios. (plural)
- Each participant returned a portfolio. (elimination)

These strategies are also suggested by the OWL Purdue and The Chicago Manual of Style. If avoidance strategies do not yield a good sentence, however, APA and The Chicago Manual of Style recommend writing *he or she*, *his or her*, etc., as in (4):

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- Each participant returned his or her portfolio.

Sometimes the two gendered pronouns are combined in writing as “s/he” or “(s)he.” However, having a large number of these spellings in the paper can be distracting. This is particularly true if the author then goes on to write “his/her” and “him/herself.” Having many slashes can give the paper a messy look. Both APA and The Chicago Manual of Style specifically caution writers to avoid such spellings, and APA recommends avoiding other strategies like choosing a pronoun arbitrarily or alternating between them sentence by sentence.

Recommendations

Among academics, the trend is still to use *he or she* to refer to “somebody,” “anyone,” an anonymous survey respondent, or a person whose gender is unknown. This is very likely the recommendation that will be handed down by the reviewer. Using *he or she* has the best chance of giving your research article the appropriate tone of conventional grammar while acknowledging both genders. In addition, you can use a robust writing assistant tool like Trinka. It is an AI-powered writing assistant that makes style and tone enhancements as per the APA style guide and helps you choose gender-neutral pronouns by correcting biased and insensitive language to avoid criticism and make your point effectively.

However, it is important to be aware of the issues mentioned above. Too many instances of *he or she* will make a paragraph wordy and difficult to follow. Therefore, in at least some instances, it is good to choose avoidance through the use of some of APA’s strategies.

Further, some researchers may intentionally use singular *they* as a reflection of their stance on gendered language or their desire to further the long-standing colloquial usage. The acceptance of singular *they* appears to be increasing.

Reference

Sarah Grey (2015, August 7). *Subject-Verb Agreement and the Singular They*. Retrieved from https://indiancopyeditors.wixsite.com/copyeditor/single-post/2016-1-22-subjectverb-agreement-and-the-singular-they

Category

1. Diversity and Inclusion
2. Language & Grammar
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