



Pronouns and Gender-Fair Writing

Summary of handout topic

This handout explains the tensions between the traditional rules of English grammar and gender-fair writing. It explains the nature of this conflict as well as the options writers have for responding to it.

Introduction

In English, pronouns that refer to people reflect both the gender and number of the nouns they replace, and there is supposed to be agreement between pronouns and the nouns they replace. This can cause a number of problems for contemporary users of English, who wish to avoid these situations:

- Assuming the gender identity of a specific person
- Classifying a general noun as masculine or feminine, when the noun could refer to people of any gender identity
- Reifying the binary understanding of gender

Challenges

Examine the following two examples, which represent some of the challenges writers may face:

*The **chef** has prepared a special dessert for me. **He** made it without eggs because I am allergic to eggs.*

*The **professor** will issue grades at the end of the quarter. **He** will explain to students how grades are calculated on the first day of class.*

In some situations, these sentences will satisfy a writer. If these sentences are written about a particular chef or professor whose gender identity is known to be male, they may be satisfactory.

However, what if the gender identity of this particular chef is unknown to the writer? It is not appropriate for the writer to guess the gender identity of this specific person is male. What if, in the second example, these are sentences in a guidebook for new students, and they are meant to refer generally to all professors, many of whom are not male? In the past, “he” was often used as a default universal pronoun in this way, but this usage is now widely understood to be sexist.

Choices

- Using “**he or she**” instead of “**he**” is an option sometimes used in these situations, but it can become unwieldy, especially if you are writing a paragraph or more about the chef or professor and must repeat “he or she” many times. Furthermore, there are gender identities that do not align with “he” or “she,” and this language is exclusionary of those identities.
- Sometimes you can **make the original noun plural**, so that the corresponding pronoun is the gender-neutral, plural “they.” But this does not always work. If only one chef made the dessert, we would be

misrepresenting the truth by using “chefs” instead of “chef.” In the second example, however, this strategy works well:

***Professors** will record grades at the end of the quarter. **They** will explain to students how grades are calculated on the first day of class.*

- Another option is to work to **rewrite the sentence entirely to avoid using a pronoun**. For example:

*The **chef** has prepared a special dessert for me and made it without eggs because I am allergic to eggs.*

*The **professor** will record grades at the end of the quarter and will explain to students how grades are calculated on the first day of class.*

This strategy may involve some sacrifice of clarity and style. In other cases, it may be difficult, impossible, or undesirable to avoid the use of pronouns entirely, especially in a lengthy piece of writing.

- A final option is to **intentionally use they, their, or theirs as singular pronouns**.

*The **chef** has prepared a special dessert for me. **They** made it without eggs because I am allergic to eggs.*

*The **professor** will record grades at the end of the quarter. **They** will explain to students how grades are calculated on the first day of class.*

In this case, the writer avoids making assumptions about gender or treating certain gender identities preferentially by using gender-neutral pronouns. Many writers and readers appreciate the gender-fair nature of this construction, and it is therefore becoming increasingly common to use they, their, or theirs as singular pronouns. Some individuals now specify they, their, and theirs as their pronouns, wishing to always be referred to with these gender-neutral pronouns.

However, when we use this construction, we break with a long-standing grammar rule that pronouns must match their antecedents in number. It seems likely that in the future, the singular they/their/theirs will become officially accepted, and rulebooks and guidelines will change accordingly. The 2017 version of the influential Associated Press style book, for example, permits the singular use of they/their/theirs for the first time, and other style guides are likely to follow suit. However, you should be aware that some readers and a number of official guides to style still classify the singular they/their/theirs as a grammatical mistake. Therefore, as a writer, you may need to consider both the benefits and possible costs of this choice given the purpose of and audience for your writing. When possible, consider talking with your intended reader(s) about their thoughts on this issue.

There is one final case to be aware of if you adopt the singular they. In some contexts, it is common to use “one” as a generic singular subject. Consider this sentence written in a philosophy class:

*When **one** considers these two choices, **they** may feel both are unethical.*

Here, because the writer has elected to use “one” as a generic **singular** subject which is not gendered, most readers will prefer the writer remain consistent in using “one,” instead of switching to “they,” which has traditionally been classified as **plural**. Because the use of the singular they is not necessary to avoid unwanted gendering, using “they” to refer to the same “one” will likely make some readers wonder if “one” and “they” are different entities. A recommended revision of this sentence would therefore be:

*When **one** considers these two choices, **one** may feel both are unethical.*

Alternately, the sentence could be more substantially rewritten to avoid this issue.

Conclusion

Grammar changes as a result of usage—that is why contemporary American English looks substantially different from the British English of hundreds of years ago. The commitment of many writers to making English gender-fair is making the singular use of they, their, and theirs a more accepted practice. Because this is an area of active change and debate, it is important that you are thoughtful about the choices you make.

Want to talk to someone about the information in this handout or how to apply it to your own writing? Make an appointment to come into the HWC and talk with a professional or peer tutor: writing.caltech.edu/appointments



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