

University Writing Center

APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY®

Gender-Inclusive Language

In September 2019, Merriam-Webster's Dictionaries announced their annual "Words of the Year." At the top of the list is a common pronoun:

Our Word of the Year for 2019 is they.... English famously lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun to correspond neatly with singular pronouns like *everyone* or *someone*, and as a consequence *they* has been used for this purpose for over 600 years.... More recently, though, *they* has also been used to refer to one person whose gender identity is nonbinary, a sense that is increasingly common in published, edited text, as well as social media and in daily personal interactions between English speakers.

"They" is an acceptable third-person solution that allows all readers to feel included, regardless of their gender identity or pronouns.

How to Make Sentences Gender Inclusive

- Option 1: Rephrase to make the subject plural, so the subsequent pronouns are too.
 - Original sentence: "If a student comes to the University Writing Center, a peer consultant will work with him or her."
 - *New sentence: "If students come to the University Writing Center, peer consultants will work with them."*
 - Original sentence: "Every student we see in the University Writing Center brings his or her assignment and experience to the session."
 - *New sentence: "All of the students we see in the University Writing Center bring their assignments and experiences to the session."*
- Option 2: Change "he or she" to "they"; "him or her" to "them"; "his or her" to "their."
 - Original sentence: "If a student comes to the University Writing Center, a peer consultant will work with him or her."
 - *New sentence: "If a student comes to the University Writing Center, a peer consultant will work with them."*
 - Original sentence: "Every student we see in the University Writing Center brings his or her assignment and experience to the session."
 - *New sentence: "Every student we see in the University Writing Center brings their assignment and experience to the session."*

What Do the Four Main Style Guides Say About Singular "They"?

Of the four main writing styles—commonly abbreviated as AP, APA, CMoS, and MLA—the *Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* (2017) and the 7th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2019) recognize the formal use of singular "they" in their manuals. The AP states: "*They/them/their* is acceptable in limited

cases as a singular and/or gender-neutral pronoun, when alternative wording is overly awkward or clumsy” (p. 274).

The APA declares categorically:

Use “they” as a generic third-person singular pronoun to refer to a person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context of the usage.... The use of the singular “they” is inclusive of all people, helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender, and is part of APA style. (p. 120)

The 17th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017) states:

They and *their* have become common in informal usage [as gender-neutral singular pronouns], but neither is considered fully acceptable in formal writing, though they are steadily gaining ground. (p. 361)

The *Chicago Manual* lists nine other “techniques for achieving gender neutrality” (pp. 359–60).

The CMoS Shop Talk blog is written by the editors and staff of the *Manual*. In 2017, in a blog entry on the pronoun, they touched on the issue of writers referring to “a specific, known person who does not identify with a gender-specific pronoun such as *he* or *she*,” noting that this was covered in the 17th edition of the *Manual*: “[A] person’s stated preference for a specific pronoun should be respected.’ This usage is still not widespread either in speech or in writing, but Chicago accepts it even in formal writing” (cmosshoptalk.com).

Finally, the ninth edition of the *MLA Handbook* (2021) has this to say about the singular “they”:

Because it lacks grammatical agreement, this use of singular *they* has been considered a less desirable option than revising to use the plural or rephrasing without pronouns. But it has emerged as a tool for making language more inclusive (see “Guidelines”), and the MLA encourages writers to accept its use to avoid making or enabling assumptions about gender. (<https://style.mla.org/using-singular-they>)

Quick Tips for Gender-Inclusive Writing

- Avoid language that implies a person’s gender is a choice.
 - Using language like, “Sam identifies as nonbinary” and “Sam’s preferred pronouns are they and them” assume that Sam’s identity and pronouns are a decision, rather than a fundamental part of who they are.
- Avoid making assumptions about a person’s gender identity, sexuality, or pronouns.
 - Unless these have been specifically stated, default to the singular they to avoid misgendering.
- Use gender-inclusive language whenever possible, especially when circumstances are unknown.
 - E.g. “firefighter” instead of “fireman,” “spouse” instead of “husband” or “wife”
- Acknowledge neopronouns when you encounter them.
 - Neopronoun=a recently created gender-neutral pronoun that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of gender identity

- Some individuals use pronouns such as xe/xir or e/em; treat these the way you would any other pronoun.
 - E.g. “Marta went back to get xir phone.”
- If you’re not sure about a person’s pronouns, you can always ask!

For more information about the use of “they,” go to <https://www.mypronouns.org>.

