

He, she, they? Why it's time to leave this grammar rule behind

BY STEVE GARDINER *August 24, 2016*

*Editor's Note: Ask a teacher what he or she did this summer and he or she (or should I say they) will tell you that a good deal of time is spent prepping for the next school year. Educators will also tell you that they spent the summer analyzing their prior year's performance, what went well and what didn't.*

*Steve Gardiner, who's been teaching high school English in Montana for the past 38 years, says when it comes to grading English essays he's ready to make a change that will lessen the workload on his red pen — and yes, it involves grammar.*

As a high school English teacher, I have been crossing out the singular use of the word 'they' for many years. I have burned up hundreds of red pens, and hours of time, correcting this grammatical usage based on a traditional gender binary of he and she. It's time to move on.

Although there is historical precedent, writers like Shakespeare and Chaucer and many others who used a singular "they," most language experts throughout the 20th century saw this usage as an error. Language evolves over time and often, social changes bring about modifications in word use. The issue of the missing singular gender-neutral

pronoun is one of those situations.

That's why I cheered when the [American Dialect Society](#) met in Washington, D.C., recently and voted to make the word 'they' acceptable and correct when used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. The change comes during a time of unprecedented discussion about gender identity issues.

For example, "Every student should do the best they can." That statement, while true, is incorrect, at least in sense of recent grammatical usage. It should bother us when we hear it, but it doesn't. That's because it has become so commonplace that related sentences featuring the daily usage, even for media commentators and many other educated speakers.

As a high school English teacher, I have been crossing out the singular use of the word "they" for many years. In the example above, the correct version would read, "Every student should do the best he can," or "Every student should do the best she can." The subject student is singular and the pronoun they is plural, so we need to use either he or she to achieve noun-pronoun agreement. Three or four decades ago, it wasn't much of a problem. We used the pronoun 'he' because the masculine form was dominant. Then we lived the years of seeking political correctness and gender equity, and the 'he' became more often 'he or she' or 'he/she' until we realized that reading paragraph after paragraph of he/slash/she quickly became

tedious.

If we wanted to remain gender-neutral, we needed to avoid 'he' or 'she' and the option most readily available to us was 'they,' which is a gender-neutral pronoun, but plural. Yes, it would be possible to change the subject to plural and create the sentence, "All students should do the best they can," and that would be correct, but it does not always say exactly what we are wanting to express. The problem, then, has been that the English language is missing a gender-neutral, singular pronoun.

OK, we do have 'it,' which is a gender-neutral, singular pronoun. But 'it' is generally not considered correct for use in describing a human being. We reserve 'it' for things or animals, so 'it' does not quite fill the opening, either. Most of us would not care to say, "Every student should do the best it can." I doubt that sentence sounds correct to very many people.

We, as a society, made progress on the gender equity issue, we created a consciousness, an awareness, but we never assigned a word to let us take care of the problem grammatically.

To create a singular gender-neutral pronoun, we could create a new word. Several have been suggested over the years, but none have made it into mainstream language usage. Another option is to

say that since most people don't hear the singular-plural agreement problem now, perhaps the application of the usage rule has changed and the word 'they' is now both singular and plural, in which case the original sentence earlier in this article is now correct.

Having fought this battle with students for more than three decades, I am ready to admit defeat. Every student is going to write what they want. Every broadcaster is going to say what they want. There, I even wrote it myself, and most readers probably did not notice.

The use of the singular 'they' simply does not seem like a mistake anymore. Now that the American Dialect Society has voted that it is not an error, I can save red ink and time, if only I can refrain myself from marking it. I am willing to try.



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*From PBS Newshour: Teachers' Lounge*