

Resources and Context for Promoting Gender-Inclusive Language  
UMassD Writing and Multiliteracy Center  
<https://www.umassd.edu/wmc/>

Adapted from the [Purdue OWL's "Gendered Pronouns & Singular 'They'"](#)

**Is using "they" as a singular pronoun grammatically incorrect?**

In short, no. Grammar shifts and changes over time; for instance, the clunky *he or she* that a singular *they* replaces is actually a fairly recent introduction into the language. Singular *they* has been used for a long time and is used in most casual situations; you probably do it yourself without realizing it. We are simply witnessing a reorientation of the rule, mostly with the intention of including more people in language.

When individuals whose gender is neither male nor female (e.g. nonbinary, agender, genderfluid, etc.) use the singular *they* to refer to themselves, they are using the language to express their identities. Adopting this language is one way writers can be inclusive of a range of people and identities.

**To what extent is the use of "they" as a singular pronoun widely accepted?**

Using gender-inclusive language and gender-neutral pronouns is not just a move for the sake of political correctness...these practices are becoming officially recognized by language organizations and other official bodies. Recently, the Chicago Manual of Style and the Associated Press (AP) style book have both announced that they will be accepting *they/them/their* as an example of a singular and/or gender-neutral pronoun. The American Dialect Society crowned singular *they* its word of the year in 2015. That same year, the Oxford Dictionaries website added the honorific *Mx*, defining it as "a title used before a person's surname or full name by those who wish to avoid specifying their gender or by those who prefer not to identify themselves as male or female" (OED Online).

**Is this a new concept?**

Gender neutral pronouns were not invented in the modern period—they have a vast and long history. The Oxford English Dictionary's first citation for a gender-neutral,

indefinite *they* is from about 1375 from the romance of William of Palerne. The use of *they* as an indefinite pronoun which refers to people in general has been used even longer. *They* appears in 1382 in Wycliffe's translation of the Bible. Additionally, In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare uses *they* in the line, "To strange sores, strangely they straine the cure" (see OED Online).

However, it has only been recently, with the changing conception of gender and society's growing acceptance of non-binary individuals, that gender-neutral pronouns have been more widely discussed.

## Checklist for Revisions for More Inclusive Language (adapted from the [UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center's resource on Gender-Inclusive Language](#))

As you review your writing, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have you defaulted to using "man," "men," "he," or "him" to refer to someone who is not or might not identify as male?
2. If you have mentioned someone's sex or gender, was it necessary to do so?
3. Do you use any occupational (or other) stereotypes (e.g., policeman; freshman; congressman)?
4. Do you provide the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people of different genders?

Perhaps the best test for gender-inclusive language is to imagine a diverse group of people reading your paper. Would each reader feel respected and included? Envisioning your audience is a critical skill in every writing context, and revising with a focus on gendered language is a perfect opportunity to practice.

## Additional Resources

[International Writing Centers Association: Position Statement on Singular Use of "They"](#)

[Oxford English Dictionary: "A brief history of singular 'they'"](#)

[APA Style: "Welcome, singular 'they' "](#)