<center>What is the commotion about singular "they"?</center>

Although the usage of singular *they* has a long history, recently singular *they* has been brought to the forefront of the English grammar psyche. This is in part because those who identify as non-binary have claimed the pronoun *they* as their pronoun of choice. |. Singular *they* has been used as an antecedent to indefinite pronouns and singular nouns since the late 1300s; only within the last two centuries has the usage of singular *they* been criticized (1,2). While the English language continues to evolve, it is important to understand how to use singular *they* in order to refer to nonbinary individuals, how singular *they* can be used generally, and when the use of singular *they* is not permissible.

History of Usage

Singular *they* originated as a solution to a missing aspect of the English language. Chambers described this need in 1985: "One most annoying gap in English vocabulary is that created by the lack of a third person singular pronoun that does not state explicitly the sex of the person or persons referred to" (1). One main usage of singular *they* through history was with singular indefinite pronouns, which require a singular pronoun as an antecedent. However, generally speaking, indefinite pronouns are plural notionally. This can be seen in historical examples:

- "If ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother *their* trespasses" Matt 18:35 (AV), 1611
- "I would have everybody marry if *they* can do it properly" – Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park,* 1814
- "Almost anyone under the circumstances would have doubted if [the letter] were *theirs*, or indeed if *they* were *themselves*." Emily Dickinson, 1881 letter

In addition to its use with indefinite pronouns, singular *they* has been historically used with singular nouns that are not gender specific:

- "Every servant in *their* masysters livery – Lord Berners, translation of Froissart's *Chronicles*, 1523 (in McKnight)
- "A person can't help *their* birth" – W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 1848 (OED)

Commented [KW3]: Are these going to be footnotes at the bottom of the page? If so, these numbers should be superscript to correspond with the footnotes at the end of each page.

Commented [KW4]: Consider italicizing the uses of "they" and "their" in these examples to help readers quickly identify the pronoun.

Commented [KW5]: I'm not sure what the reference is for this example. Is it from a corpus or another source? There is no "McKnight" listed in the reference page, so it would be difficult for readers to look up this example on their own.

- "The consumer is very careful with what *they're* spending" – Eugene Glazer, on *Wall Street Week*, (television), 10 Dec. 1982

Such examples demonstrate that singular *they* has been used for centuries.

Historical authors who did not use singular *they* used the masculine third-person singular pronouns (*he*, *him*, *his*) instead. These pronouns had their own limitations, such as when an indefinite pronoun would refer to women. For example, ". . . everyone will be able to decide for himself whether or not to have an abortion" (Albert Blumenthal, N.Y. State Assembly). Most importantly, using only the masculine singular pronouns has inherent gender bias, demonstrating preference towards men. As a solution to gender bias, the combination *he or she* is sometimes used; however, this phrase can become awkward with too much use.

Changes in pronoun usage has precedence in English. The pronoun *you* was previously only used as a second-person plural pronoun, while *thou* and *thee* fulfilled the role of second-person singular pronouns. While the shift of *you* most likely occurred as a result of social reasons rather than out of linguistic necessity, the result demonstrates how pronoun usage can change over time.

Contemporary Usage

Currently, there are four main definitions of singular they in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: (1) used with a singular indefinite pronoun antecedent, (2) used with a singular antecedent to refer to an unknown or unspecified person, (3) used to refer to a single person whose gender is intentionally not revealed, and (4) used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary. (Citation 3)

Individuals who use They/Them pronouns

The most recent sense of singular *they* is the fourth sense described by Merriam-Webster: becoming the pronoun of choice for nonbinary individuals. There are many complexities involved in how nonbinary individuals would describe their gender, but in general terms, such individuals don't identify as either male or female. As a result, *he* or *she* as personal pronouns are insufficient as these individuals

Commented [KW6]: I really like the examples you have to illustrate the historical use of singular they, but I am curious as to where you found these examples. Is there a database that you searched, or did you just take note while doing other homework? It may be a good idea to link to your examples like you do with your other sources.

Commented [KW7]: What is the year of this quotation? Years are included with your other quotations, so for citation purposes and consistency, it would be a good idea to include the year of this quotation as well.

Commented [KW8]: Make sure that your pronouns "this" and "these" have something specific to refer to.

Commented [KW9]: It is a good idea to explain which shift "this shift" is referring to because you mention two shifts in this paragraph.

Commented [KW10]: This paragraph is only one sentence. Consider adding more details about contemporary usage (perhaps providing examples of all the uses) to flesh out the paragraph.

require a singular pronoun devoid of gender. In the seventeenth century, people who didn't conform to either gender were sometimes referred to with the pronoun *it* in English laws (2). This solution was imperfect as *it* could be dehumanizing, so such individuals sought a different genderless singular pronoun. A more appropriate solution was found in the already existing pronoun *they*.

Acceptance by Style Manuals

Across the board, style manuals have accepted singular *they* as the preferred pronoun for nonbinary individuals. In such circumstances, the pronoun *they* still takes a plural verb. For example, "Sam is a musician. They are very talented." *They* as a generic antecedent for indefinite pronouns is more contested. The acceptance of *they* according to some of the different style manuals is described below.

AP (Associated Press) Stylebook

AP accepts singular *they* in limited cases when other options are overly awkward. However, "rewording usually is possible and always is preferable" (4). When *they* is the pronoun of an individual, AP recommends using the person's name, or rewriting the sentence to avoid the pronoun when possible. If use of the pronoun is necessary, the author should explain in the text that the person prefers gender-neutral pronouns.

APA

APA Style fully endorses singular *they* as a person's personal pronoun and as a generic third-person singular pronoun. The style manual cautions against the use of combination forms such as *he or she* or *she and he* except for instances where the author knows "that these pronouns match the people being described" (7). APA does add that if the singular generic *they* is awkward, the sentence should be reworded.

MLA

Commented [KW11]: Because you are talking about the history of pronouns, you could mention how *it* was dehumanizing because *it* is the same pronoun used to refer to objects. But this is merely a suggestion.

Commented [KW12]: Because the article is in more of a formal style and doesn't specifically address the reader, an invisible *you* in this instance doesn't really fit the tone of the rest of the article. I would suggest including something like "the author should" to maintain the formal tone of the article.

MLA encourages the use of a person's correct pronouns, including those who prefer *they/them* . The manual notes that although the use of singular *they* was traditionally discouraged, it has emerged as a tool for making language more inclusive, and the MLA encourages writers to accept the use of singular *they* to avoid making or enabling assumptions about gender" (8).

The Chicago Manual of Style

Chicago notes that the use of singular *they* is accepted in general spheres. However, Chicago recommends avoiding the use of singular *they* in formal writing. Along with the other manuals, Chicago encourages the respect of an individual's preferred pronouns.

How to Avoid Singular They

As evidenced by the style manuals, while singular *they* is gaining wider acceptance, sometimes it is still best to avoid singular *they* in professional work.

1. Omit the pronoun

2. Use a plural antecedent

3. Use an article instead of a pronoun

4. Repeat the noun

5. Use the relative pronoun *who*

Commented [KW13]: Good job! I like the rough start that you have to your article. As you revise and work on your final draft, I have just a couple of suggestions of things to keep in mind:
1) Remember to avoid the use of *they* when not referring to singular *they* because you might confuse your readers. *Their* is okay as long as it is clear.
2) Generally speaking, be aware of pronouns, especially *this*, *these*, and *that*. If these pronouns don't have a clear antecedent, rephrase the sentence.
3) Make sure to cite your sources, including your examples so that readers can look them up if they want to. I believe we are supposed to cite them in one of the Chicago styles (either Author-Date or Bibliography).
4) Make sure to include your Bio at the end for the final draft.
Good job with your rough draft and good luck with your revisions! Let me know if you have any questions about my suggestions and edits.

Works Cited

1 – Merriam-Webster Usage Dictionary

2 - https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they

3 - https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they

4 - https://www-apstylebook-com.erl.lib.byu.edu/brigham-young-university-9648caf1-3822-481d-aa7e-2147e4d73d9b/ap_stylebook/they-them-their

5 - https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.erl.lib.byu.edu/book/ed17/part2/ch05/psec255.html

6 - https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.erl.lib.byu.edu/book/ed17/part2/ch05/psec048.html

7 - https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/grammar/singular-they

8 - https://style.mla.org/using-singular-they/