

Resources for using “they” as a singular pronoun

Current Style Standards

APA Style (“Use of the singular ‘they’ is endorsed as part of APA Style because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender.”)

MLA Style (The singular they “has emerged as a tool for making language more inclusive, . . . and the MLA encourages writers to accept its use to avoid making or enabling assumptions about gender.”)

Chicago Manual of Style (CMS has traditionally recommended avoiding use of singular they. They accept it, however, when referring to a non-binary person. “When referring specifically to a person who does not identify with a gender-specific pronoun, . . . *they* and its forms are often preferred. . . . Like singular *you*, singular *they* takes a plural verb. So when the context requires it, *they/them/their/theirs*, like *you/your/yours* (long used as both singular and plural forms), can be used to refer to one person . . . A number of other gender-neutral singular pronouns are in use, invented for that purpose; forms of these are usually singular and take singular verbs. In general, a person’s stated preference for a specific pronoun should be respected.”)

History of Use

Oxford English Dictionary (“The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces singular *they* back to 1375 . . . Since forms may exist in speech long before they’re written down, it’s likely that singular *they* was common even before the late fourteenth century.”)

Merriam-Webster (“We will note that *they* has been in consistent use as a singular pronouns since the late 1300s; that the development of singular *they* mirrors the development of the singular *you* from the plural *you*, yet we don’t complain that singular *you* is ungrammatical; and that regardless of what detractors say, nearly everyone uses singular *they* in casual conversation and often in formal writing.”)

BBC – A brief history of gender neutral pronouns (“[T]hese identifiers are nothing new and have actually been used throughout the history of literature. Examples of the singular ‘they’ being used to describe someone features as early as 1386 in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and also in famous literary works like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in 1599. ‘They’ and ‘them’ were still be used by literary authors to describe people in the 17th Century too – including by Jane Austin in her 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*.”)

Recognition of Widespread Use

American Dialect Society’s Word of the Decade, 2010-2019 (“[S]ingular ‘they’ was recognized [as the word of the decade] for its growing use to refer to a known person whose gender identity is nonbinary. Singular ‘they’ was previously selected by the ADS as the 2015 Word of the Year.”)

Merriam-Webster Word of the Year, 2019 (“Nonbinary *they* takes a plural verb, despite referring to one person, which can make the grammatically conservative uncomfortable. It’s helpful to remember that the pronoun *you* was initially plural, which is why it too takes the plural verb even when it’s referring to a single person. ‘You are’ has, of course, been perfectly grammatical for centuries . . .”)