

Style Guide Analysis of Singular *They*

Aaron A. Cronk

Department of English, Iowa State University

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Dr. Jo Mackiewicz

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Abstract

Recently, the use of *they* as a generic third-person pronoun—popularly known as singular *they*—has become both popular and controversial. In an effort to understand the context and discussion surrounding singular *they*, I examine the historical use of singular *they* (including the advent of the grammar rules proscribing its use). Next, I explore the sociological and cultural changes which have and continue to provide the impetus for current expanded usage of singular *they*. Afterwards, I provide readers with a summary of a popular style guide usage recommendations for singular and non-binary *they* and explore areas of disagreement and ambiguity.

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As most native English speakers and writers know, pronouns refer to (and stand-in for) some noun. As a result, a pronoun must typically agree with its antecedent (the noun to which the pronoun refers) in both number and gender. For example, it is grammatically incorrect to refer to my friend Tom as *we* (unless also including myself) or *she*. However, in recent years, the use of the personal pronoun *they* has seen significant controversy among those who are interested in linguistics and grammar. The controversy surrounding this seemingly innocuous pronoun stems from its use as a referent for a singular noun. This usage is known as “singular *they*” in linguistics circles and is the point of some contention for at least two reasons. The purpose of this writing is to explore the reasons behind the controversy as well as how some of the major writing style guides handle the topic.

This essay begins with a brief summary of the history of the use of singular *they* dating back to early medieval romance writings and the proscription against its usage originating with the prescriptivist movement among grammarians in the 18th century. Next, I address the controversy surrounding the modern usage of singular *they* and its rise in popularity stemming from a cultural move towards inclusion and an increased recognition of individuals who identify as non-binary or gender fluid. Finally, this paper provides a summary of usage recommendations for singular *they* based on several influential style guides such as the Chicago Manual of Style, the AMA Manual of Style, and the Microsoft Style Guide.

How Has Singular *They* Been Used Historically

While controversy surrounds the modern use of singular *they*, readers may be surprised to discover that this wasn't always the case. Linguists and literary scholars have traced the earliest documented instance of singular *they* to a medieval romance entitled *William and the Werewolf* dating back to 1375. These scholars hypothesize that since the written word often reflects what was already

common in the speech, the use of singular *they* may have been emerged far earlier in medieval speech (Baron, 2018, paras. 2-3). Regardless of when, exactly, singular *they* first emerged, it gained popular acceptance and was incorporated throughout the English-speaking world. Well-known literary works such as the Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599) clearly demonstrate that singular *they* had gained wide-ranging acceptance spanning many years and was viewed as acceptable for use beyond the common vernacular (Davis, 2019, paras. 14-19). However, it should be noted that while these examples demonstrate the popular use of singular *they* in informal writing it is unclear whether singular *they* was acceptable for use in formal writing.

It wasn't until Enlightenment-era grammarians and scholars in the 17th and 18th centuries began adopting prescriptivist grammar rules that singular *they* become verboten—particularly in formal writing. Many scholars during this era viewed ancient Greek and Latin as the gold-standard in language and determined that formal English grammar should conform to the patterns of these two languages. Inherent in this belief was the notion that ancient Greek and Roman culture (and language) was superior to other cultures—even the Western European culture that had emerged out of the Enlightenment (McWhorter, 2018, paras. 7-8). For example, Quaker scholars of this era such as George Fox prohibited the use of singular *you* and promoted the use of *thee* and *thou* (McWhorter, 2018, paras. 21-22) (Baron, 2018, para. 4). Schoolteacher, Anne Fisher emerged from this era with her primer, *A New Grammar*, in which she provides pedagogical and grammar instruction. Based on the grammar rules originating in this landmark primer published in 1745, the English-speaking world made the shift away from singular *they* to *he* as the universal generic third person pronoun (McWhorter, 2018, paras. 7-9) (Davis, 2019, paras. 18, 20-22). Sadly, little is known about what prompted Smith to include her proscription of singular *they* in her curriculum. However, Anne Fisher is heralded by many as the first female grammarian (Henderson, 2019, para. 5).

Controversy Surrounding the Use of Singular *They*

Towards the end of the 20th century, the English-speaking world began to awaken to the need for bias-free and inclusive language. For roughly two hundred year, *he* was the accepted pronoun when referring to someone in the generic third person. However, in the 1970s many writers, scholars, and grammarians began to make their writing more inclusive through the use of constructs such as “he or she”, “he/she”, or “s/he” (Davis, 2019, paras. 28-38). Numerous psychological studies indicate that universal *he*, though intended as generic reference, was often viewed, by readers, as preferential treatment towards men (BBC Newsbeat, 2019, para. 15). These constructs, while more inclusive, make sentences unnecessarily wordy and interrupt the flow of writing (Davis, 2019, paras. 31-32). It became obvious that writers needed an alternative universal third-person pronoun that was both inclusive and concise—singular *they*, which had never been fully purged from spoken and informal English usage, was an obvious choice. Nevertheless, prescriptivist grammar rules are difficult to overcome and some scholars were hesitant to accept the evolution of this pronoun.

In the early years of the 21st century, another cultural issue would arise that would provide additional impetus to adopt singular *they* as the universal generic third-person pronoun. At the turn of the century attitudes and beliefs towards individuals with non-binary sexual and gender identities began to become warmer and more accepting. As alternative sexual and gender identities steadily gained acceptance among the English-speaking world many trans- and non-binary people developed creative new pronouns to better fit the wide range of sexual and gender identities which were given the opportunity to flourish (Ansley, 2020, para. 3). However, as the growth of non-binary pronouns—such as *ze/zir*, *ze/hir*—increased rapidly, it became increasingly clear, to some, that alternatives to singular *they* face difficulties similar to the awkward common-gender constructs of the late 20th century. This problem is further compounded by the fact that these are wholly new words rather than simply new or expanded usages of already extant words (BBC Newsbeat, 2019, paras. 18-20). These complications, when taken

together, help explain why novel non-binary pronouns haven't yet enjoyed the widespread success that singular *they* has enjoyed (Ansley, 2020, para. 3) (BBC Newsbeat, 2019, paras. 20-23). Singular *they*, as a familiar pronoun within spoken and informal language, seems to have a leg-up on its linguistic competitors.

Nevertheless, singular *they* still faces significant challenges on many fronts. Some people object to the use of singular *they* out of concern for fidelity to prescriptivist grammar rules. For example, Jen Doll, staff writer and editor for *The Wire*, writes, "The easy fix is not necessarily the best one, and *they* is not the solution to our pronoun ills. The singular *they* is ear-hurting, eye-burning, soul-ravaging, mind-numbing syntactic folly." (Doll, 2013, para. 16). Other people object to the use of singular *they* based on their resistance to cultural shifts towards more inclusive language (Gelernter, 2016, paras. 3-4). Finally, others who fully support and promote inclusion also object to singular *they* because of a belief that its use forces non-cis-gendered individuals to return to an existence in which their distinct identities must be subsumed and hidden as a part of the larger whole undoing their hard-fought emergence and growing acceptance within Western culture (Hanna, Stevens, Keyes, & Ahmed, 2019). What this debate makes clear is that there are no easy answers to one of the most glaring problems within the English language.

Comparison of Style Guide Usage Recommendations

Given the ongoing controversy surrounding the use of singular *they*, it's no surprise that style guides provide a wide range of recommendations regarding its usage. Usage recommendations differ greatly from one influential style to the next and often in very nuanced ways. Two highly influential style guides, the *MLA Handbook* and the *Associated Press Stylebook*, do not even address the topic of singular *they*. Below, I analyze the usage recommendations for singular *they* from the four other influential style guides: The University of Chicago's *Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) 17th edition*, American Medical

Association's *AMA Manual of Style*, American Psychological Association's *APA Style (7th edition)*, and the Microsoft Writing Style Guide.

When it comes to usage recommendations, the critical item for analysis is the extent to which a particular style guide approves of singular *they*. A summary of style guide recommendations for the use of singular *they* and other related grammatical structures can be found in Table 1: Summary of Style Guide Recommendations. The *APA Style* recommends unqualified acceptance and usage of singular *they* (American Psychological Association, 2019, Section 4.18 para. 1, 3-4, 6). Taking a more nuanced approach, both the Microsoft Style Guide and *CMOS* recommend rewriting sentences to avoid the use of singular *they* while acknowledging that the pronoun *he* is no longer a universally accepted generic pronoun to refer to someone of unspecified gender (Microsoft Corp., 2019, para. 3) (University of Chicago Press, 2017, Section 5.48). Chicago's recommendation is particularly notable as a deviation from its recommended dictionary, Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary, which has endorsed singular *they* for both gender-neutral and non-binary usage (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d. 3a-c). The *AMA Manual of Style* currently rejects the use of singular *they* (Network Editors, The JAMA, 2020, Ch. Correct and Preferred Usage – Sex/Gender; Personal Pronouns). However, at the official AMA blog, *AMA Style Insider*, Tracy Frey writes that AMA will provide recommend usage similar to the *CMOS* in the next edition of the *AMA Manual of Style* (Frey, 2017, para. 4). This wide variation in recommendations seems to indicate that usage of singular *they* is moving towards acceptance but has not fully overcome resistance within the minds of scholars and grammarians.

Despite the mixed recommendations for the use of singular *they*, the style guides seem to be in much closer agreement about the use of *they* for individuals who identify as gender-fluid or non-binary. Even the *AMA Manual of Style*, which doesn't currently recommend the use of singular *they*, recommends that writers should respect a person's chosen pronouns such as *xi*, *zi*, or non-binary *they* when referring to non-cis-gendered individuals (Network Editors, The JAMA, 2020, Ch. Correct and

Preferred Usage – Sex/Gender; Personal Pronouns). In a blog post entitled, “How Many Is They?”, on AMA’s official blog, AMA Style Insider, M. Sophia Newman writes, “[P]eople who want to use pronouns that reflect a gender different from their assigned sex should have their wishes respected. This squares with the approach used in JAMA Network journals.” (2019, para. 3). This approach echoes the usage recommendations of the CMOS, the APA Style, and Microsoft Style Guide, all of which emphatically recommend that writers should follow the known pronoun preferences for individuals (American Psychological Association, 2019, Section 4.18 para. 2) (Microsoft, 2020, Pronouns and Gender para. 3) (University of Chicago Press, 2017, Section 5.48, 5.256). These recommendations create another sticking point in that it is often unclear what gender a given person identifies as. Certainly, there are a number of celebrities and other well-known individuals who have officially announced their gender-identification preferences. However, the style guides reviewed are currently unclear as to how writers and editors are to discover that a person identifies in such a manner. For cases in which a person’s preferred pronouns are unknown, writers and editors should follow their style guide’s recommendations for the use of singular *they*. Nevertheless, the trend in style guides towards the usage of non-binary *they* indicates a growing acknowledgement within the writing and linguistic communities to be more inclusive of individuals who do not identify in traditional ways.

Another critical aspect of style guide usage recommendations regarding the use of non-binary *they* and singular *they* is whether or not to include a plural or singular verb. For example, which usage is preferred between the following sentence constructions?

Single verb construction: “Every individual is unique. They **is** a combination of strengths and weaknesses.”

Plural verb construction: “Every individual is unique. They **are** a combination of strengths and weaknesses.”

Here, again, the style guides have divergent recommendations. The Chicago Manual of Style and the APA Style Guide indicate that the plural verb form is preferred for use with both singular and non-binary *they* (University of Chicago Press, 2017, Section 5.48) (American Psychological Association, 2019, para. 7). The Microsoft Style Guide recommends that writers and editors, “Use the verb form that agrees with the subject of the sentence in number.” (Microsoft Corp., 2020, Verbs – Verb Agreement). This recommendation, however, does not directly address the use of singular or non-binary *they*. Similarly, the AMA prefers “agreement in number be maintained in formal scientific writing.” (Network Editors, The JAMA, 2020, Ch. Correct and Preferred Usage – Sex/Gender; Personal Pronouns) The AMA’s official blog, AMA Style Insider, seems to indicate that when the AMA does shift its recommendation towards singular *they*, the AMA will likely recommend the use of the plural verb form (Newman, 2019, para. 11). While the uncertainty surrounding how to correctly conjugate verb forms when using singular or non-binary *they* may seem like a minor dilemma for many writers, the uncertainty surrounding this issue may be the sticking point that is holding up universal acceptance of singular *they*.

Since some style guides recommend rewriting a sentence or phrase to avoid the use of singular *they*, while acknowledging that *he* is no longer an acceptable universal generic third-person pronoun, it would be valuable to know how a writer or editor should go about doing so. Again, consensus among the four analyzed style guides seem to converge around recommendations similar to rewriting in the second person or using the plural (American Psychological Association, 2019, 4.18 para. 12) (Microsoft Corp., 2019, para. 1) (University of Chicago Press, 2017, 5.255) (Network Editors, The JAMA, 2020, Ch. Correct and Preferred Usage – Sex/Gender; Personal Pronouns). Using this advice, the sentence, “A person often talks to themselves when deep in thought,” would become, “One often talks to oneself when deep in thought,” when rewritten in the second person or, “People often talk to themselves when deep in thought,” when rewritten with a plural subject. Only the AMA recommends the use of gender-neutral constructions such as “he or she” or “he/she” (Network Editors, The JAMA, 2020, Ch. Correct

and Preferred Usage – Sex/Gender; Personal Pronouns). However, all of the reviewed style guides discourage the use of so-called common-gender constructions such as “s/he”, “shem”, or “shim” (American Psychological Association, 2019, 4.18 para. 12) (Microsoft Corp., 2019, para. 1) (University of Chicago Press, 2017, 5.255) (Network Editors, The JAMA, 2020, Ch. Correct and Preferred Usage – Sex/Gender; Personal Pronouns). Based on these recommendations, it is clear that alternatives to the use of singular *they* are limited and often require careful rewording of sentences to ensure that the meaning is unaltered. Thus the use of singular is often a writer or editors most efficient option.

Table 1: Summary of Style Guide Recommendations

	CMOS	AMA	APA	Microsoft
Singular they	Rewrite to avoid	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Rewrite to avoid
Non-binary they	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Verb number	Plural verb	Subject-verb agreement	Plural verb	Subject-verb agreement
Gender-neutral Constructions:				
“he or she”	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable
“he/she”	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable
Common-gender Constructions:				
“s/he”	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable
“shem”	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable
“shim”	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Unacceptable

As a result of the preceding analysis, it is clear that while there currently exists a wide range of usage recommendations among several of the most reputable style guides as indicated in Table 1, the

trend within the field appears to be moving toward gradual acceptance of singular. In part, this evolution seems to be a direct result of the dearth of other acceptable options and the difficulty involved with introducing new pronouns into the English lexicon. For example, writers and editors alike balk at the awkward use of common-gender and gender-neutral constructs such as “he or she” and “he/she” while most English speakers and writers are unfamiliar with the numerous preferred pronouns introduced by the LGBTQ+ community. To further complicate the situation, writers are often unaware of a person’s preferred gender identity and/or pronouns. In those situations, though perhaps not ideal, a generic non-generic third person pronoun such as singular *is* is more convenient for both writers and editors. Conversely, the widespread acceptance of singular *they* appears to be somewhat hindered by a general lack of consensus among scholars and grammarians regarding the conjugation of verb forms when singular *they* is used as the subject. In recent years, however, singular *they* has received greater attention and support as a result of the general public’s broad-based acceptance of non-binary *they*. Though it is not yet clear whether singular *they* will be fully endorsed by the style guides reviewed, what is clear is that 18th century proscriptions against the use of singular *they* become increasingly less compelling as the English-speaking world becomes increasingly conscious of their word choices.

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