

‘He or she’ versus ‘they’

Some people object to the use of plural pronouns on the grounds that the usage is ungrammatical. The pronoun needs to agree with its antecedent. In fact, use of plural pronouns to refer back to a singular subject is not new. It represents a revival of a practice dating from the 16th century. The practice is increasingly common in English and is now widely accepted both in speech and in writing for a variety of reasons.

In English, a person’s gender is explicit in the third person singular pronouns (i.e., he, she, his, hers, etc.). There are no personal pronouns that can refer to someone (as opposed to something) without identifying whether that person is male or female. Thus, this question: What should writers do in sentences such as these?

- If a student is thinking about a gap year, he/she/they can get good advice from the counselors.
- A researcher has to be completely objective in his/hwer/their findings.

In the past, people tended to use the pronouns he/his/him, or himself in situations like such as the following:

- If a student is thinking about a gap year, he can get good advice from the counselors.
- A researcher has to be completely objective in his findings.

This approach is outdated and sexist. There are other options that allow writers to arrive at a ‘gender-neutral’ solution. They can use the wording “he or she” or “his or her.” etc. This approach can work well as long as a writer does not have to keep repeating “he or she,” “his or her,” etc. throughout a piece of writing.

- If a student is thinking about a gap year, he or she can get good advice from the counselors.
- A researcher has to be completely objective in his or her findings.

Writers can make the relevant noun plural by rewording the sentence as necessary. This approach can be a good solution, but it will not always be possible.

- If students are thinking about a gap year, they can get good advice from counselors.
- Researchers have to be completely objective in their findings.

PRACTICE

Student editors should make recommendations for the appropriate pronoun usage in the following sentences. They should be prepared to defend their choices.

1. The high school sophomore said **he/she/they was/were** planning on running for class officer.
2. If Kristi or George got a cold, I would have sympathy for **him/her/them**.
3. The student believed **his/her/their** safety could not be guaranteed.
4. **He/She/They has/have** a gender identity that encompasses both male and female, and **his/her/their** attire ranges from pencil skirts, high heels and lipstick to blazers, bow ties and facial hair on any given day.
5. Payton writes eloquently about **his/her/their** nonbinary identity. **He/She/They has/have** also appeared frequently in the media to talk about **his/her/their** family’s reaction to their gender expression.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
SEARCH FOR



Glossary of Terms -
Transgender
glaad.org

The
New York
Times

‘He,’ ‘She,’ ‘They’ and Us
nytimes.com



Stylebook
nlgja.org



He or she’ versus ‘they’
en.oxforddictionaries.com

The
Washington
Post

Gender-neutral pronouns:
When ‘they’ doesn’t identify
as either male or female
washingtonpost.com