

The Trouble with *They*

The Writing Center
1017 Arts and Sciences Commons
Tel. 592-2534

It's enough to drive anyone out of their minds.—George Bernard Shaw

The above quotation doesn't reveal what *it* was driving Shaw, but the *their* embedded in the sentence is enough to drive us at the Writing Center to research current thought about its use. Even though readers recognize the sentence's inherent meaning, the use of *their* is technically a grammatical error. **A pronoun must agree with its antecedent (*anyone*) in number.**

The Problem

However, this rule is not simple to follow because the English language has no third person singular pronoun that includes both genders, and some readers are bound to be offended by the use of *he* to refer to an antecedent that could be either sex. So student papers contain sentences like these:

- A. Everyone wants their life to be prosperous.
- B. The single parent has difficulty finding time to study and to care for their child.
- C. A student writing a summary needs to keep his (correct, but sexist) personal reaction to himself.
- D. A budding novelist needs to be aware of the degrees of meaning that can be achieved when they choose their verbs.
- E. When a student registers for a class, he should consider the professor teaching it.

Possible Solutions

1. Make the antecedent plural.

- A. All people want their lives to be prosperous.
- B. Single parents have difficulty . . . for their children.
- C. Students writing . . . their personal reaction to themselves.
- D. Budding novelists need to . . . when they choose their verbs.
- E. When students register for a class, they . . .

2. Use a version of *he* or *she* to replace the faulty pronoun(s).

- A. Everyone wants his or her life to be prosperous.
- B. The single parent has difficulty . . . for his or her child.
- C. & D. Awkward sentences result by changing *they* to *he* or *she* and

- their* to *his* or *her* or *themselves* to *him-* or *herself*.
- E. When a student registers for a class, he or she . . .

3. Use a different noun determiner like *a*, *an*, *the*, *one*, or *all*.

- A. Everyone wants a prosperous life.
B. The single parent has difficulty finding time to study and to care for a child.
C. A student writing a summary needs to keep out all personal reactions.
D. & E. not applicable

4. Thoroughly revise sentence.

- A. Everyone wants prosperity.
B. Finding a balance between studying and child care is difficult for the single parent.
C. Summary writing does not include personal reactions.
D. The budding novelist needs to be aware of the degrees of meaning that can be achieved when choosing verbs.
E. A student who registers for a class should consider the professor teaching it.

Preferred Solution

According to a study of seventeen English handbooks published since 1990, the preferred solution is to revise the sentence; changing the singular antecedent to plural was the most common. The use of some case of *he* or *she* was advised only when absolutely necessary as it is cumbersome.

Historical Perspective

- pre-1800's Authors used a pronoun according to the meaning they intended.
1746 J. Kirby published the first grammar book to advocate the use of a generic *he* to refer to genderless singular pronouns.
1850 British Act of Parliament established the legal use of the generic *he*.
1970's The revitalization of the woman's movement began to have an impact on the sexist implications of the generic *he*.
1990's Of seventeen current handbooks studied, eight acknowledged the singular *they* in informal use, and four hint at its possible future acceptance.
Fall, 1997 The Writing Center at FSU conducted a survey of 51 faculty and discovered that 29 think the singular *they* is wrong, but 21 think it's sometimes acceptable; 30 prefer revision and 26, the use of *he* or *she*. Consistency was important to 18. The use of *he* or *she* was preferred by 23; *he/she* got 11 votes; *s/he*, 6. Two faculty added the use of *one* as a solution.