

Introducing the inclusive “they” (sometimes called the singular “they”)

Barbara McClintock, MA, Certified Translator and Certified Terminologist*

What do you do if you do not know a person’s gender and are unable to ask? In 2019, the American Psychological Association (APA) published an article welcoming the singular they which sets out the basic rules. Use the singular they “(a) when referring to a generic person whose gender is unknown or if relevant to the context; and (b) when referring to a specific known person who uses “they” as their pronoun.”¹

Although “they” is not the only pronoun to refer to a person, it offers a good solution for writing inclusively: the inclusive they. The use of “they” as an inclusive pronoun has a long history in English, but it became more widely accepted in Canada as a result of greater interest in gender rights and the promotion of its adoption, particularly by Gael Spivak and James Harbeck from Editors Canada.² The singular they is in fact a misnomer because “they” takes a plural verb whether it refers to one or more people.³ By all rights, it should be called the inclusive they. The main purpose of the inclusive they (with their and them) is in fact to refer to all the possible genders in a simple and neutral manner. It has become the default style in North America to replace he/she in recent years. Remember what inclusive means with this excerpt from the definition in the 2004 *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, p. 766:

4 a. not excluding any section of society. b. (of language) deliberately non-sexist, esp. avoiding the use of masculine pronouns to cover both men and women.

Yay for the inclusive they! Drop us a line if you agree, or better still, just adopt it.

* The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

1. Chelsea Lea, Welcome, Singular “They,” APA Style, October 2019, <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they?fbclid=IwAR2xlqdB4Lx9vIBF8921vu3rtZhxN1ltDHN7cyPxz9uktDn1mqUjI8PxCCk>.
2. Gael Spivak, Editors Canada, “The Singular “They” Is Gaining Acceptance,” *Language Portal of Canada*, October 23, 2017. <https://www.noslangues-ourlangages.gc.ca/en/blogue-blog/singular-they-eng>
3. Barbara McClintock, The Singular They, Conjugations and Some Particularities, *The Editors’ Weekly*, February 18, 2020 <https://blog.editors.ca/?p=6453>.