



2016

Singular They: Lesson Plan

Facing the Future, Western Washington University

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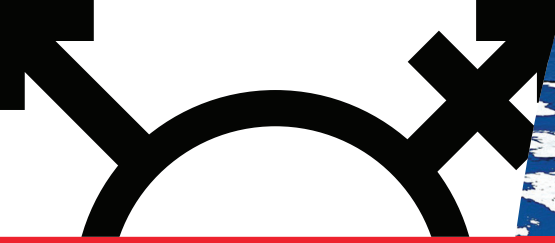
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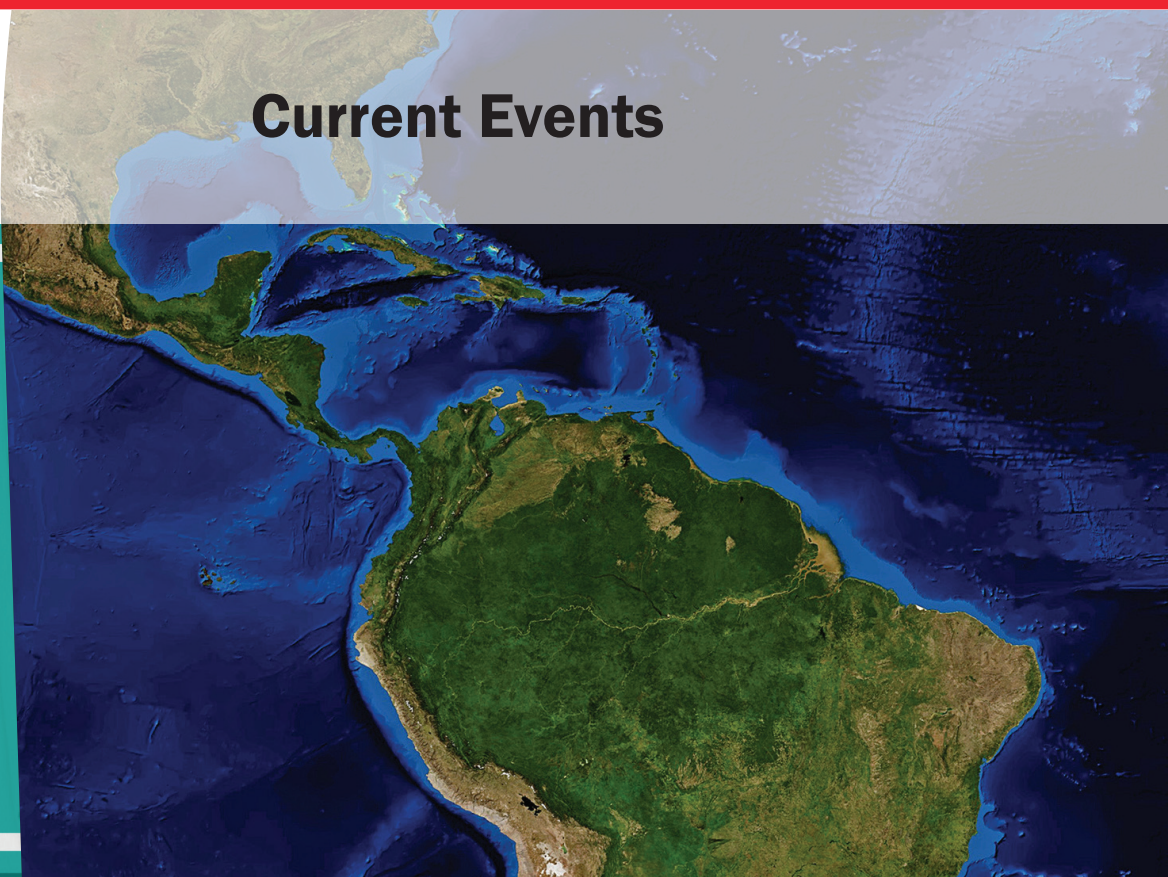
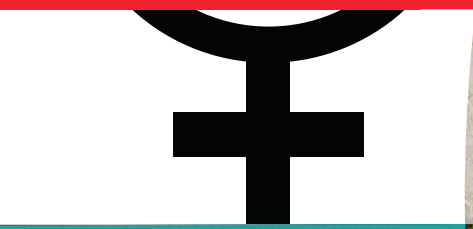
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Singular They



Current Events



Recommended for Grades 8-12

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SINGULAR THEY

The singular they is gaining attention in the media and writing and teaching circles for its inclusive nature. Once considered acceptable and used by authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Jane Austen, the singular they fell out of favor in style guides in the early 20th century.

For example, in their *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White command writers to stop misusing they: “Do not use they when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as each, each one, everybody, every one, many a man. Use the singular pronoun.” The authors also caution writers against using they with the antecedents anybody, somebody and someone. (In the first 1918 edition of *Elements*, Strunk ruled that “he” was the default unless the antecedent was feminine.)

Later, the burgeoning feminist movement of the 1970s asked writers to consider the deferral to masculine pronouns to represent all people. *Vis*, *cos*, *zir* and *zim* came into being, but their use was limited. Mathematician Michael Spivak even created his own set of gender-neutral pronouns in 1983. None of these options gained traction in popular writing.

Now, the singular they is addressing another problem with English grammar: There is no room for gender identities other than the he/she binary of singular pronouns. Grammarians are drawing lines in the sand over this return to they as a singular pronoun.

Print sources and language associations are setting the precedent by adopting the use of the singular they in their publications. The *Washington Post* uses it. The American Dialect Society (ADS) named it 2015’s “Word of the Year.” Ben Zimmer, chair of the ADS’ New Words Committee, explained, “In the past year, new expressions of gender identity have generated a deal of discussion, and singular they has become a particularly significant element of that conversation. ... While many novel gender-neutral pronouns have been proposed, they has the advantage of already being part of the language.” Because this word is already in the language—even though many people consider its use to be incorrect—it may have more of a chance of extending gender fluidity into our language in ways that other words have fallen short.

SINGULAR THEY

RESOURCES

"Thanks to the Singular They" Argues that teachers need to teach the singular they to make classrooms more inclusive and affirming.

>> <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/thanks-singular-they>

"The Use of Singular "They" in APA Style" Explains the use of singular they according to APA style.

>> <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/thanks-singular-they>

"Everyone Uses Singular 'They,' Whether They Realize It Or Not" Commentary that gives an overview of the issues of grammar surrounding singular they and considers its future.

>> <http://www.npr.org/2016/01/13/462906419/everyone-uses-singular-they-whether-they-realize-it-or-not>

"2015 Word of the Year is singular 'they'" Announces the American Dialect Society's choice of singular "they" as the word of the year.

>> <http://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they>

"All-Purpose Pronoun" Gives an overview of singular they's history and considers its value in social media contexts.

>> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/magazine/26FOB-onlanguage-t.html>

SINGULAR THEY

Sonny grew up wanting to be a mermaid. His room was filled with mermaids and merman. Even his sheets had mermaids. When he was five, he started telling his mom that he didn't want his penis anymore. Every time he went to the doctor, he asked his mom on their drive there if the doctor could make Sonny a girl. When Sonny drew pictures of himself, he gave himself long hair—like a mermaid's—and signed his name "Sonia" on the back of the paper where no one else could see it. Before he even knew the word "transgender," he knew that he didn't feel right in his body. He knew he didn't like to be called "he" when his mom talked about him. He knew he didn't like hearing "his shirt" or "call him for dinner." Sonny wanted to be Sonia, and the language surrounding him did not reflect his identity. Because the English language's singular pronouns only work as a binary of he/she, writers should start using the "singular they" to ensure that everyone's identity is reflected in language.



The "singular they" used to be considered grammatically incorrect. Because "they" is plural, not singular, grammarians reminded writers that pronouns need to agree in number and gender. As Colleen Clemens writes in her essay "Thanks to the 'Singular They,'"

*...in their *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White command writers to stop misusing they: "Do not use they when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as each, each one, everybody, every one, many a man. Use the singular pronoun." The authors also caution writers against using they with the antecedents anybody, somebody and someone.*

For example, a person using what Strunk and White considered correct grammar would write the following:

Sonny is always late. He needs a clock.

The pronoun "he" agrees in gender and number. However, if the writer thinks about Sonny/Sonia, Sonia is left out of this sentence.

Because language evolves and adapts to those speaking it, current grammar rules are moving toward a more inclusive nature to reflect the transgender movement. Though the "singular they" is not taught widely, it is gaining traction in teaching circles



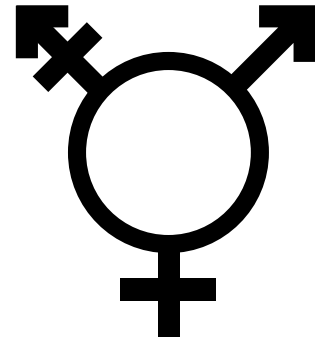
SINGULAR THEY

and style guides. The American Dialect Society voted the gender-neutral singular “they” as their Word of the Year in 2015. The Washington Post has used it in articles. A person using the “singular they” would write the above example this way:

Sonny is always late. They need a clock.

While this example does sound grammatically wrong, the pronoun use is inclusive and makes room for Sonny’s gender identity while “He needs a clock” limits Sonny to the male gender when she identifies as female. The “singular they” makes space in the sentence for Sonny’s gender identity.

Though English speakers’ ears will need some time to adjust to hearing the “singular they,” its incorporation in speaking and writing is crucial if there is ever going to be full inclusivity for those who identify as transgender. Limiting people’s identity in the name of grammatical rules is unfair and discriminatory. Sonia deserves the opportunity to see their identity reflected in the language they use.



SINGULAR THEY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the author argue for the use of the "singular they"?

2. What are the two sides of the debate over the use of pronouns?

3. How does the author illustrate their point in the last line of the essay?
