

Pronouns: The Singular 'They'

A discussion has arisen regarding the use of the singular 'they' within School meetings and in interactions whilst at work and study. This paper will set out what is meant by using the singular 'they', why and when it can be used and how to move into this towards this language form if it is not someone's current habit.

A draft email communication to staff has been included on the final page of this paper.

What is the singular 'they'?

The singular 'they' is used when the gender of the person being referred to is not known, or when talking or writing about a hypothetical person. It is used in place of 'he or she', or 'he' or 'she'.

For example:

Gender is not known - 'Neha says her partner will come to the lab's social this weekend. They are preparing a cake to share'

Hypothetical - 'I would like to speak with a student representative that is studying a post graduate taught course. I would like them to answer some questions related to their student experience. They will need to be available for 10 minutes'

Why use the singular 'they'?

Using the singular 'they' is the most grammatically accurate pronoun to use when gender is unknown. This is broadly acknowledged and referenced in grammatical and style guides in many reputable Universities and organisations.¹

There are a number of other equality related benefits:

- Using the singular 'they' when referring to an unknown person rather than 'he' or 'she' helps to communicate to others that you have not assumed that a particular gender fits within the sentence in preference to/above another.
- It assists in ensuring that you are not perpetuating biases or stereotypes accidentally.
- It is a simple way to demonstrate respect for colleagues that do not identify either with their sex assigned at birth, or with either 'he' or 'she' as pronouns for themselves. It will not always be obvious who this applies to, so adopting the singular 'they' is the most polite and considerate language form.
- It sets a good example to others as to best practice when referring to others.

When should singular 'they' be used?

During meetings and in communications with your team, colleagues and students when talking about hypothetical situations and hypothetical people.

In 'getting to know you conversations' with a new staff member or student in relation to their partner, if they mention them.

When you do not know, or do not feel confident that you know, the gender identity of the person that you are speaking about to someone else.

When a person has told you, or you have noticed via another way (auto-signature, badge etc) that their pronoun is they.

How can I begin using singular 'they'?

If you are not currently using the singular 'they', but would like to begin to, you could:

Challenge yourself to think 'Is there a need to specify a gender in this sentence? What part of the communication would suffer if I didn't?'. If the answer is: no, and: nothing, then you can use the singular 'they'.

Focus on one type of communication first. You may convene a committee or working group. You could begin by ensuring your slides and examples use the singular 'they' where possible.

You can remind yourself not to assume the gender of colleagues and students partners by using 'he' or 'she', leaving it up to them to specify (or not) through conversation.