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A Word For All: Ethics, Usability and the Singular "They"

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A Word For All: Ethics, Usability and the Singular "They"

By Em Wiginton

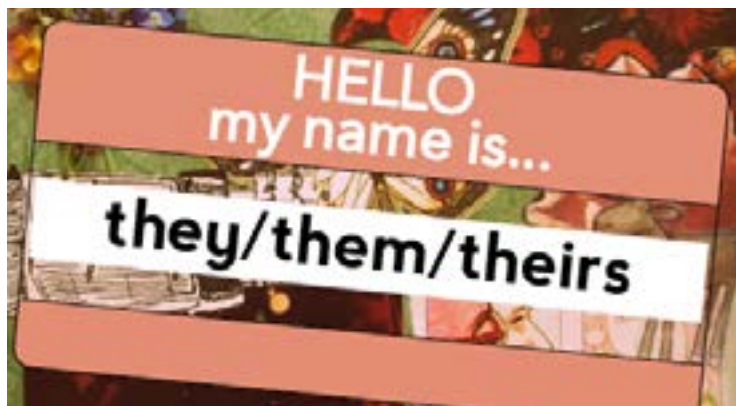
In professional writing, audience dictates the language, form and content of every document. These considerations often bring up questions of ethics: how do we create the most usable, inclusive document for a certain set of people, and how can we make sure we are intertextually humanizing our readers?

At the intersection of ethics and usability in professional writing lies the issue of audience and gender—and more specifically, use of the singular “they.”

Much of the time, we use the singular “they” without even thinking about it—“Someone left their phone in class,” for example—but it has still met criticism based on the belief that it can only be used as a plural pronoun. Even my high school English teachers insisted that we use “he or she” in our academic papers, but where style and larger conversations about gender intersect, these standards are changing.

"THEY" AND ETHICS

Recent discourse has brought into question whether or not “they” can be used as a singular pronoun. However, as understanding about gender and inclusivity evolves, the use of “they” has become the best way of making sure you’re referring to everyone in your audience.



This made news in December 2015 when the Washington Post cited the singular they as the solution to the gender problem in writing. “They” includes every gender in a given audience, but also validates the existence of gender-neutral individuals, who may prefer “they” as their pronoun of choice.

"THEY" AND USABILITY

The singular “they” is also the best option in terms of form. The APA Style Blog, which is the user-created counterpart to the style guide that many professional writers adhere to, suggests “they” instead of s/he, (s)he, he/she, or alternating use between he and she, as these can be awkward and distracting to the reader. The AP Stylebook has officially accepted the singular they, but the APA Style Guide has yet to change its standards on its use.

THE FUTURE OF "THEY"

The failure of style guides to catch up with conversations about inclusivity and ethics raises an interesting dilemma: What exactly are writers to do when it comes to gender and audience?

Thaler and Sunstein’s *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* discusses how “biases can creep in when similarity and frequency diverge.” In other words, it can be easy to lump people into stereotypes and use non-inclusive wording, especially when style has yet to encourage otherwise. However, professional writing is, above all, a humanistic genre—one in which we must be activists and advocates for our users.

In all issues of audience gender, class, race and ableness, our writing should always be inclusive of and be usable by everyone.