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# Non-Binary Gender Inclusivity in the Writing Center: A Review of the Literature

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University Writing Centers, by nature, are safe spaces facilitated by welcoming staff whose goals are to provide excellent service that brings out the best in student writers and their writing. Because of the personal nature of writing and the reputation of Writing Centers as convivial spaces, Writing Center professionals must take all aspects of student identity into consideration when learning how to address and interact with students in ways that respect and affirm their identities. Many would agree that gender plays a huge role in how students identify themselves, and most would affirm that analyzing gender identity is essential when reflecting on nondiscriminatory practices. Non-binary gender identity, an umbrella term encompassing all who identify outside of or in between the binary of women and men, is being discussed now more than ever, and one of the largest issues surrounding non-binary gender identity in academia is the argument over whether or not to include the singular they in academic writing. As the only well-established third-person epicene pronoun in the English language, the singular they is a vital linguistic element for many non-binary people. Therefore, Writing Center professionals must

be open advocates of the singular they if they want their spaces to be truly inclusive for gender-nonconforming students.

While most Writing Center personnel would express interest in making their spaces more inclusive for non-binary students, many still feel their unique authoritative role in the university does not allow them to take an official stance on the singular they – despite the pronoun’s increasing rise in popularity and acceptance. Students come to Center staff for assistance with their writing, yet these students – and, therefore, we Writing Assistants – must answer to the higher authority of those who will eventually evaluate the students’ work. Writing Center tutors are often willing to take a stance on progressive language but still feel the need to let students know, when it comes to controversial language opinions, the professor always has the final say. However, if Writing Centers are to truly uphold our reputation as progressive, inclusive spaces for writers of all identities, then we should be able to use our authority as writing professionals to argue in favor of the singular they, which allows the voices of our gender-nonconforming students to be included in academic writing.

For years, select members of university Writing Centers have discussed the singular they and asserted their individual support. Many Writing Centers have adopted gender-inclusive practices, but whether or not the singular they specifically is allowed in academic writing is still debated. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the argument in favor of the singular they and to urge Writing Centers to finally take an official stance on this pronoun’s inclusion in academia.

The review includes a compilation of the grammatical arguments in favor of the singular they, a discussion of academic organizations' limitations of this pronoun, and a visual of what our goals, as Writing Centers, should be for the progression of non-binary inclusivity in writing.

### Grammatical Foundation

The grammatical argument for the singular they is not a new concept. In 2012, Jonathon Owen of Copyediting presented a concise yet comprehensive argument in favor of the singular they in his article "The Case for Singular They." He begins his argument by pointing out the issue we have when it comes to referring to gender-neutral people in third person: "English lacks a suitable gender-nonconforming pronoun" (1). English language users cannot accurately and adequately identify gender-neutral nouns if we do not have an epicene pronoun to correlate with these antecedents. Owen mentions that, while some throughout history have attempted to use the generic "he" in these situations – "Someone left his book on the desk" – and while others have attempted to create new epicene pronouns for the English language, neither of these solutions have remained permanent (1). Newly-coined epicene pronouns, as members of closed-class morphemes, are too difficult to fully implement into a language, and the generic he "has fallen out of favor over the past several decades with the rise of feminism and the push for gender equality" (1).

Owen cites a few major language authorities to back up his proposal of the singular they as the best candidate for an epicene pronoun in English. He discusses the American Heritage Dictio-

nary's stance on the pronoun, saying that a "growing minority of the dictionary's usage panel accepts singular they when referring to genderless nouns, and a majority now accepts it when referring to indefinite pronouns" (1). He also mentions how Philip B. Corbett, associate managing editor for standards at the New York Times, believes the singular they's acceptance will eventually win out, but we should avoid using it until then (1). However, Owen questions Corbett's position: "If its acceptance is growing and inevitable, why avoid it? And how are we supposed to know when it's finally OK to use it?" (1-2).

The real issue with anti-singular-they arguments, according to Owen, is that they are founded on false evidence. "First, they treat it as a relatively recent innovation that is infiltrating written language from spoken language. Second, they claim that it's simply ungrammatical to use a plural pronoun to refer to something grammatically singular" (2). Owen uses these opinions as the basis for his historical and grammatical arguments in favor of the singular they.

First, he outlines a brief history of the singular they, discussing how it has been used by esteemed writers such as William Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Jane Austen, Lord Byron, Edith Wharton, and W.H. Auden (2). Lindley Murray was the first to attack the singular they and prescribe the generic he in its place (2). Then, in 1850, Parliament "legally prescribed generic he over he or she or they" (2). Owen's historical evidence proves that the singular they is not a new phenomenon; in fact, language authorities' prohibition of this epicene pronoun is relatively new and, more importantly, arbitrary.

He then presents what is perhaps the most important grammatical evidence in favor of the singular they. Most prescriptivists against the singular they would say that “a plural pronoun simply doesn’t agree with a singular antecedent,” but Owen points out the major flaw in this argument:

Fortunately, it’s not as simple as that. There’s another plural personal pronoun that English has used as a singular for centuries: you. It started life as a plural, contrasting with singular thou, but it began to be used as a formal singular pronoun in the 13th century. In English, the purely singular second-person form, thou, fell out of common use by the 17th century, leaving us with a plural pronoun pulling double duty. If pressing a plural pronoun into service as a singular were going to destroy our language’s sense of grammatical number, it would have happened over 400 years ago. (2-3)

Here, Owen debunks prescriptivists’ notion that accepting the singular they will problematize our understanding of the difference between singular and plural antecedents. This argument also reflects the very real concept that language shifts are the result of our culture’s ever-changing linguistic needs, and prescriptivists who attack the progression of the singular they forget “that language doesn’t come crashing down around us, leaving us all grunting and gesturing wildly in hopes of somehow being understood” (3).

Linguist Anne Curzan’s argument for the singular they, as briefly outlined in her book *Fixing English*, reflects many of Owen’s points. Curzan’s main argument is that, since the pronoun has already gained so much popularity in spoken English, it seems

unreasonable to fight for its restriction in written English (128-129). She says that “the pronoun they functions as a singular in the language and is, therefore, not ungrammatical by linguists’ definition of ungrammatical” (128). From a linguistic perspective, they’s accepted meaning as a singular and plural third-person epicene pronoun in spoken English proves its worthiness for formal written language.

Curzan is not the only language authority to point out this argument. In 2015, the American Dialect Society (ADS) voted for the singular they as Word of the Year. The pronoun “was recognized by the society for its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of he and she” (American Dialect Society). The ADS’s argument in favor of the singular they reflects Curzan’s claim: it makes no sense to restrict usage of a word already prominently utilized in our language. The ADS mentions the singular they’s usage throughout the centuries, discusses how it is a “sensible solution” to English’s pronoun problem, and points out that it “has the advantage of already being part of the language.” Moreover, the ADS takes Curzan’s argument a step further by not only directly correlating this pronoun with antecedents’ whose gender is unknown or irrelevant but by also associating this pronoun with antecedents who are gender-nonconforming individuals. The ADS declares that those using the singular they as a personal identifier influenced the society’s decision to vote for the pronoun and promote its “newer usage” as a gender-nonconforming identifier.

From this brief review of the literature on the singular they, its history, and its progression, it is clear that the pronoun's grammaticality (or supposed lack thereof) is not a solid argument against the acceptance of the pronoun in academic writing. In his more recent article, "Singular They Revisited," Jonathon Owen discusses the singular they's progression since 2012. He points out that members of the American Copy Editors Society are annoyed with those who object to the singular they, mentions BuzzFeed's endorsement of the pronoun in their style guide, and quotes Ben Zimmer's comments on the pronoun's progression (1). Then, Owen once again addresses his naysayers and uses their false arguments to fuel his own argument. He rejects the notions that the singular they is confusing and/or ungrammatical and instead asserts that "the primary objection to singular they has to do not with grammar but with acceptability" (1). He then argues that "the only real thing standing in the way of singular they is editors," who fear their readers' reactions to informal language in published writing (1). Owen ends his article with a declaration of his new authority over his own house style guide and a call to action for others to follow him in his decision in allowing the singular they in formal writing (2).

### Outdated Style Guides

Despite the strong grammatical argument in favor of the singular they and despite the pronoun's dramatic increase in popularity over the last few years, most style guides remain outdated in terms of epicene language – that, or they simply still neglect to take an official stance. The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) is the most up-to-date guide on the singular they – The University of



Chicago published a new manual in 2017 in which they devote a section to discussing this issue. Though the University of Chicago “recommends avoiding its use,” they do bring up the grammatical foundation of the singular they – comparing it to you, your, and yours in a manner similar to Owen (“The Case” 2-3) – and, most importantly, they emphasize that “a person’s stated preference for a specific pronoun should be respected” (241). While the University of Chicago does not officially give their support to the use of the singular they in academic writing, they at least present the idea that respect and accuracy should be the driving forces behind language choices involving pronouns.

The Modern Language Association (MLA), the language authority behind most academic writing in the Humanities, also updated their style guide recently – they came out with an eighth edition in 2016. However, this newest guide does not offer much guidance on the subject of non-sexist language. Instead, the eighth edition of the *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* focuses more on research and citation guidance, leaving us with the seventh edition for advice on rhetorical style. The seventh edition contains a small section dedicated specifically to nondiscriminatory language in which they conclude with suggesting students consult “one of the guides to nondiscriminatory language listed” in the back of the manual (MLA 50). Yet most of the guides they suggest were published in the 1980s, the most recent one listed being published in 2001 (MLA 259-260). Thus, MLA sticks writers with an outdated style guide containing even further outdated information.

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Publication Manual is not any better – they have not published an updated guide since 2010. Their gendered language section is slightly more thorough than MLA, though, as they do mention the sexism behind using the generic he, provide alternatives to using the conjoined he or she, and outline specific guidelines on how to correctly and respectfully refer to transgender people (73-74). However, APA does not mention non-binary gender at all, and they do not provide any guidance on using epicene pronouns or gender-neutral language in their manual.

But the guidelines in perhaps the worst shape of all are those of the National Council for Teachers of English. This organization, generally thought of as responsible for maintaining a progressive authority over composition teachers of all levels, boasts a set of "Guidelines for Gender-Fair use of Language" on their website. These guidelines, published almost two decades ago in 2002, provide authority on gender-inclusive language and practices. NCTE's guidelines, from the very beginning, are blatantly discriminatory towards non-binary individuals, as the introduction of the webpage states that NCTE is "concerned about the critical role language plays in promoting fair treatment of women and girls, men and boys" – thus excluding non-binary teachers and students altogether. As for their position on the singular they, NCTE echoes other authorities: "[The singular they] is becoming increasingly acceptable. However, classroom teachers need to be aware that state and/or national assessments may not regard this construction as correct." This statement is somewhat understandable since grade school teachers do need to be concerned with the regulations of standardized tests. But if NCTE is so blatantly direct about their

other stances on gendered language, then why wouldn't they want to take a strong stance on epicene language, too?

Furthermore, a group of members of the International Writing Center Association sent a collaboratively-written letter to NCTE asking that they update their guidelines. While the NCTE responded favorably, the guidelines still have yet to be updated. Perhaps this situation is reflective of what most style guides might think about the singular they: it is not regarded as important enough to be discussed immediately. There is a chance that language authorities have been discussing this pronoun, especially since it has become such a relevant issue. But perhaps many do not have the time or resources to put their stance on the singular they at the forefront of their priorities – even more reason why Writing Centers need to step up and take the lead on this issue.

### Writing Centers' Role

Because the singular they has a strong grammatical foundation, because style guides have yet to formally authorize the use of the pronoun, and because encouraging the singular they in academic writing is necessary for creating a truly inclusive space for all students of all genders, it is imperative that Writing Centers take an official stance in favor of this pronoun. Fortunately, some Writing Centers have already begun to argue in favor of the singular they. The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has a webpage dedicated to "Gender-Inclusive Language." Within these guidelines is a section on the singular they explaining how this pronoun looks in context. The UNC Writing Center offers this explanation on their position on the pronoun:

Some people are strongly opposed to the use of “they” with singular antecedents and are likely to react badly to writing that uses this approach. Others argue that “they” should be adopted as English’s standard third-person, gender-neutral pronoun in all writing and speaking contexts. Keep your audience in mind as you decide whether the singular “they” is a good solution for any gender-related problems in your writing.

This position statement, obviously, does not reflect a final stance on the issue. However, UNC at least offers an explanation behind why it is taking so long for the singular they to be officially acceptable. Most importantly, UNC mentions the fact that many do believe in the singular they as the epicene pronoun we need to fill the gender-neutral, third-person pronoun gap, which is more than many other style guides have done.

Like UNC, Jamila Stevenson of Warren Wilson Writing Center also puts extra effort into discussing the singular they in her article “Using Gender-Neutral Language In Academic Writing.” Stevenson argues, “Gender-neutral or non-sexed language includes pronouns that do not indicate one’s gender, allowing us to address people without making gender assumptions, and allowing a safer, more inclusive learning environment” (1). She supports this argument by providing an example of how the singular they would look in writing as a replacement for the conjoined he or she, pointing out that “while non-sexist language works solely within the gender binary of male/female, the usage of singular ‘they’ acknowledges those who identify entirely outside of this dichotomy or somewhere along the gender spectrum” (1). Her argument and evidence prove that not only is the singular they

easily integrated into written language, its integration is also vital for acknowledging non-binary individuals in writing.

Furthermore, Stevenson provides a section of “Tips for Promoting Gender-Neutral Language,” which can be easily adopted by any Writing Center (3). For students who come to the Writing Center inquiring how to integrate progressive language into their academic writing, Stevenson gives four suggestions:

- When using gender-neutral language in your academic papers, use footnotes to explain this language and encourage a dialogue with your professor.
- Be consistent! If you start using gender-neutral language, do it throughout your entire paper. Make sure you aren’t using 20 different gender-neutral pronouns in your paper.
- Provide literature about gender-neutral language to your professor.
- Realize that professors are people with their own beliefs and backgrounds. Try not to be dogmatic when talking to professors about gender-neutral language. (3)

Stevenson’s advice not only gives students the confidence to use progressive language in academic writing but also encourages students to discuss this language with their professors; having these discussions, especially with academic authorities, is crucial in gaining acceptance for progressive language in academia.

Stevenson ends her article with a list of tips for staff on how to be more gender inclusive and promote gender inclusivity (3). She echoes what many of the previously reviewed writers have said, arguing that allowing students to identify themselves with their preferred pronouns and respecting these students by consistently

using these pronouns helps create an atmosphere of inclusivity (3). She also encourages staff to participate in workshops on gender identity issues, attend events such as Trans Awareness Week, and read literature on the issues gender-nonconforming people face (3). Finally, Stevenson urges her audience to “start dialogues with your students who are openly trans and genderqueer,” so that these students’ voices can be heard, considered, and respected in academia (3).

In addition to these Writing Centers’ attempts to lead the singular they revolution, the Kennesaw State University Writing Center has presented a large amount of informal information on the subject at different conferences over the last few years. Members of this Writing Center first presented on gender identity inclusion in the Writing Center at the Southeastern Writing Center Association conference in 2015, and, in response to a surprising amount of positive feedback from conference participants, they brought this presentation to the 2016 and 2017 SWCA conferences and the 2016 International Writing Center Association conference. Furthermore, this presentation was taken to the 2017 Southeastern Women’s Studies Association conference in hopes of spreading awareness of the importance of the singular they to academics outside of Writing Centers. The KSU Writing Center has stood strongly in favor of the singular they over the years, and yet members of this Writing Center, too, recognize the issue of promoting language use that university professors could penalize students for. The overwhelming evidence is clear: many Writing Center professionals desire to be on the progressive side of the gendered language revolution, but most are unsure of when this revolution will jump forward.

## Conclusion

The issue with normalizing gender-progressive language into academic writing is that few believe they have the authority to facilitate these changes. Many too often become submissive to the rules of outdated style guides, insubstantial grammatical arguments, and self-proclaimed authoritative prescriptivists. So, when a student asks, "Can I use the singular they in my writing?" to a Writing Center Assistant, we often feel torn between our power as someone who can easily authorize the usage of such language and our duty as someone who serves students in helping them create writing that instigates positive evaluation by their professors. What Writing Center professionals need to understand is that, by becoming advocates for progressive language, we are both using our power and serving our students, as our principal goal is to get our students' voices heard through their writing. For gender-nonconforming students, progressive language is fundamental in allowing their voices to be heard. Thus, we must diminish this cyclical mentality Owen describes: "We can't accept it yet because it's not acceptable" ("The Case" 3). Instead, Writing Center professionals, as academic writing authorities, must use the literature we have to support our argument that true inclusivity starts with the acceptance and encouragement of progressive language.

The main goal of this literature review is to display the timely need for Writing Centers to officially authorize the use of the singular they in academic writing. It is clear that we cannot rely on authoritative style guides to give this pronoun the attention it needs, so Writing Center professionals need to take control of

the revolution ourselves. Furthermore, the goal here is to show that the action of authorizing the singular they is long past due. Gender-fair language use guidelines have been cultivating for over twenty years, and the singular they itself has been a hot topic for the last decade. But, for the last few years, this revolution has plateaued at the idea of not being able to fully promote an unauthorized pronoun. Perhaps, though, we should instead utilize our own role as language authorities and put the needs of our students ahead of our fears of other language authorities. Perhaps Writing Centers are the perfect vessel for this revolution, as we have the power to cultivate language change at any time. Perhaps the secret to moving forward with the singular they revolution lies in the goals and dedication of each Writing Center individual with a desire for change.



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