



# SINGULAR THEY

## FIRST USE OF SINGULAR THEY:

First, they is used when the gender of the referent (the noun to which the pronoun refers) is unknown or unimportant. This use avoids clumsy workarounds such as he/she and his or her. For example:

- Everyone needs to bring **their** laptop to class tomorrow.
- If someone made a mistake, you should tell **them** politely.
- I didn't see the person who stole my wallet. **They** reached into backpack and ran away.
- The teacher should expect students to contact **them** with questions after class.

While grammar prescriptivists may object to the use of a plural pronoun with a singular meaning, this is a widely accepted usage that dates back centuries and has finally been recognized by most style guides. Singular they is colloquial, convenient, and concise, and it is an option that English learners can and should be taught.

## SECOND USE OF SINGULAR THEY:

The second use of singular they is more contemporary. This new use of they is direct, and it is for non-binary people (i.e. someone whose gender is known or knowable, but who doesn't identify as either male or female.)

If I were introducing a friend who preferred to use the pronoun they, I would say:

- This is my friend, Jay. I met **them** at work."