

IWCA POSITION STATEMENT ON THE USE OF THE SINGULAR “THEY”

Teachers of writing in the classroom and in writing centers are becoming increasingly aware of the chronic crisis surrounding gender identity–based oppression. Inside and outside academic spaces, transgender and gender-nonconforming folks consistently experience systemic and physical violence. One way that academic spaces inflict violence is through linguistic marginalization or exclusion surrounding gender, particularly through pronoun usage. It is time for professional organizations, especially those committed to teaching, to challenge the deep-rooted structures that have been used to uphold a binary that denies access for entire communities.

This challenge has already been taken up by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in its November 2016 position statement on Language, Power, and Action. In this statement, which notes that “Language is powerful” and that “It empowers individuals to explore and change themselves and their worlds,” CCCC takes a stand: “As an organization, CCCC reaffirms its commitments to cultivating thoughtful speakers and writers, to ethical teaching and research, and to classrooms that engage the full range of the power and potential of writers and writing.”

We believe that writing centers enact the impulse described in the CCCC statement. Writing centers work with writers at the edges of their texts and of their lives and, like CCCC members, “every day engage writers from all backgrounds and cultures to explore how writing can be used to foster responsible and respectful inquiry and discussion across a range of public, academic, and civic context” (CCCC Statement on Language, Power, and Action). Further, we believe that the International Writing Centers Association has the responsibility to affirm its commitment to recognizing the full humanity of all who work with and in writing centers.

To that end, the International Writing Centers Association affirms the right of students to use the pronouns of their choice in their academic writing, including the singular *they*. The singular *they* has a long history in spoken and written English (as early as the 1400s in the OED); it permits writers to avoid specifying a gender when doing so may be irrelevant, inappropriate, or needlessly restrictive. In a written text, it also has the important advantage of accurately representing people who use *they* as their gender pronoun. Singular *they* in academic writing acknowledges and affirms the lived realities of writers who themselves use singular *they*, as well as for writers who wish to affirm the reality of transgender and gender non-conforming people. Along with [other gender neutral pronouns](#), the singular *they* helps validate the identities and stories of people who identify beyond the gender binary.

Contributors to the Oxford University Press support the use of singular *they*, as does the *Writing Center Journal*; during the summer of 2017, the Purdue OWL revised its references to pronouns to include singular *they*.

We recognize that using *they* as a singular pronoun may meet with resistance among faculty and other readers of student work. Therefore, we offer to students the following footnote that they may elect to include in their writing.

In this paper, I deliberately use the generic singular “they.” This usage has historical precedence for the last 400 years, and it is grammatical, as confirmed by linguists [links/citations]. Further, it includes people whose gender identity is not represented by the he/she binary, which erases

many members of our community. This impulse toward inclusive linguistic representation is already seen in style guidelines by professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA). The use of singular “they” is endorsed by the International Writing Centers Association, a conference of the National Council of Teachers of English.

IWCA offers this footnote text to be shared, used, or built upon for personal and academic use.