Eleanor forgot their book in reference to a book that belongs to Eleanor, or Zach has lost their car keys in speaking about the keys of Zach's car. Such usage enables speakers to identify a subject (Eleanor, Zach) without forcing a gender upon that subject (she, he). As you read, you'll want to be thinking about both sets of situations—the campaign of earlier feminists and the current push by transgender individuals—and the reactions you have to them. Smith's piece also considers the role that copy editors ultimately have in determining what is acceptable in various written contexts. So, as you read, you'll also want to be thinking about how and why copy editors came to have such authority.

The "Cultural Contexts" box in Chapter 13 discusses the range of personal pronouns that are in use now.

LINK TO Chapter 13, Cultural Contexts for Argument: A Note on Pronoun Preference.

They Should Stop: In Defense of the Singular *They*

ERNIE SMITH

"In the past year, new expressions of gender identity have generated a deal of discussion, and singular they

has become a particularly significant element of that conversation. While many novel gender-neutral pronouns have been proposed, they has the advantage of already being part of the language."

—Ben Zimmer, the chairman of the New Words Committee of the American Dialect Society, discussing the group's decision to make the singular they its word of the year. The vote favored they in part because of they's increasing importance as a way to make room for people who don't fit a predefined gender binary. (It helps that the word drops the added complication of he or she.)

IS THE SINGULAR *THEY* A PROBLEM THAT LINGUISTS CREATED FOR THEMSELVES?

For some word **purists**, the singular they is the linguistic equivalent of an ingrown hair, but for others, the solutions for getting around the problem are way messier.

purists
those who are committed to keeping a language pure from what they consider contamination of any kind, which would include changes in the language (although languages that are being spoken and written will always demonstrate evidence of change).

For centuries, the singular they was not only accepted by the public but by some of our most famous authors—Geoffrey Chaucer, Jane Austen, and Shakespeare, just to name three.

But around the late 18th and early 19th century, something happened: Critics of the specific usage appeared. The reason for this critical reassessment came about partly out of **prescriptive** vibes around the English language at the time. Long story short: We wanted English to be more like Latin, and that meant rethinking the use of plural nouns in singular contexts.

prescriptive
with respect to language, giving rules for how the language ought to be used. Purists are prescriptivists, who focus on rule giving, in contrast to *descriptivists*, who focus on describing how the language is, in fact, used. From a descriptivist point of view, the use of *they* with indefinite pronouns like *everyone* and *someone* is acceptable in all but the most formal of contexts because that is what most people do anyway.

In 1975, researcher Ann Bodine broke this down in a landmark paper, "**Androcentrism** in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular 'They,' Sex-Indefinite 'He,' and 'He or She.'" The text, republished in the 1999 book The Feminist Critique of Language, notes that the influence of Latin grammar played an important role in the increase of rules around modern grammar—and specifically gave the world the "**generic he**," a term that followed Latin form but didn't mesh with modern concerns about gender equality. She added that the then-recent attempts to ditch the generic he were really attempts to roll back a controversial change.

androcentrism
being male-centered.

***generic* he**
the use of *he* as the third-person singular pronoun when the apparent sex or gender

of an individual is not clear. For example, *Every student must bring his book to class,* meaning that all students must bring their books to class, would be an example of using *he* generically.

"Intentionally or not, the movement against **sex-indefinite 'he'** is actually a **counter-reaction** to an attempt by prescriptive grammarians to alter the language," she wrote.

***sex-indefinite* he**
the same as generic *he* in contrast to *he* used to refer to specifically to a male or males.

counter-reaction
an effort to reverse something, frequently a move in a politically conservative direction; a reaction in response to another's reaction to an original stimulus.

And many of those grammarians who tried to remedy the problem caused by this attempt to make English more like Latin have tried to patch things up. For hundreds of years, English-speakers have tried to invent words that fill the English language's most unsightly gap. Nearly all of them have failed.

University of Illinois professor Dennis Baron, a longtime supporter of the singular they, has long maintained a list of gender-neutral pronouns that people have attempted to add to the English language, the most recent example from 2015, but most of the interesting ones from the 19th century. Terms like "thon," "e," and "um" were among the most prominent attempts to improve the language. Additionally, Baron notes, complaints about the common use of the singular they were fairly common during the 19th century.

“If only occasionally found in the best writings, it is because the proofreader **interposes** his correction before the sentence reaches the public, for every editor [knows] how often even careful writers make the mistake,” a writer for the Findlay, Ohio, Jeffersonian wrote in 1877.

interpose
to place oneself between.

Baron, in introducing the concept in an essay, is quick to stick a knife in its heart before it even had a chance to fly:

> These pronouns fill a need, but none has been widely adopted, hence they are the words that failed. What has succeeded is singular they, which arose naturally in English hundreds of years ago, and is used both by speakers and writers concerned that their pronouns be inclusive, and also by many who don’t give the matter much thought at all.

Over at the dearly departed site The Toast, linguist Gretchen McCulloch calls the root cause “a series of historical accidents,” but suggests that the issues raised by grammarians are practical in nature, even if the solutions are in many ways worse than the problems in the first place.

It’s an empty space for a broken term, but who broke it?

Alice Che/Shutterstock

Identifying one's preferred pronouns is becoming more common.

FIVE LANGUAGE-WORLD STANCES ON THE SINGULAR *THEY*

1. "The fact that the masculine is the **unmarked** gender in English (or that the feminine is unmarked in the language of the **Tunica** Indians) is simply a feature of grammar."

   —A 1971 open letter in the Harvard Crimson, signed by 17 professors and teaching fellows, attempting to defend the use of gendered pronouns in the classroom, using history as a precedent for the thought process

2. "From long habit, in any case, **epicene** he is comfortably read as 'he or she' without much extra thought: 'If a customer has a coupon, he can get a free ice cream cone' would not be interpreted by any

literate person as limiting the deal to males."

—Iohannes Helonapë, a.k.a. "The Ozarks Latinist," making the case for the "generic he" from the perspective of a Latin teacher

3. "Using 'their' for singular **antecedents** is one that I think people need to [just give into]. As I've argued, it only occurs in a very limited set of circumstances, and those circumstances very unlikely to produce confusion about what is meant."

   —blogger and academic Freddie deBoer, discussing the limited use cases of the singular their

4. "Saying that singular they has been used for centuries by respected writers, that it appears to follow fairly well-defined rules, and that the **proscription** against it is not based in linguistic fact is descriptive; saying that people need to get over their dislike and accept it is not."

   —Linguist Jonathan Owen, who attempts to straddle the line between prescriptivism and descriptivism in a 2015 blog post www.arrantpedantry.com/2015/03/04/why-descriptivists-are-usage-liberals offering both sides of the singular they debate

5. "Many **ACES** stalwarts—copy editors, journalists, grammarians, lexicographers, and linguists—stand ready to embrace the singular 'their.' But not us. We avoid it whenever we can."

   —Mary Norris, the "comma queen" at The New

Yorker, emphasizing the magazine's hardline stance against the singular they. Linguistics blogs had a field day with this comment.

unmarked
in linguistics, what is expected, usual, or regular. The unmarked word order in English is SUBJECT + VERB + OBJECT, for example, *The child ran into the room*.

Tunica:
indigenous language of the United States spoken by the Tunica Indians of the Mississippi Valley. The last native speaker died in 1948.

epicene
of indeterminate sex. An epicene pronoun would not indicate the sex of the person being referred to. In English, our first-person singular pronoun (*I*) and our second-person singular pronoun (*you*) are epicene; that is, they do not indicate the sex or gender of individuals about whom they are used. Some languages, however, have different first- and/or second-person pronouns for females and males to use.

antecedent
in grammar, the noun that a pronoun refers to. For example, in *Pierre brought his pet to class*, *Pierre* is the antecedent for the pronoun *his*.

proscription
a statement or rule stating what *not* to do. For example, *Don't say "ain't"* is a proscription. Proscriptions contrast with *prescriptions*, which are statements or rules stating what to do; for example, *Be sure that the subject and verb of a sentence agree in number* is a prescription.

ACES
The American Copy Editors Society, a professional organization for copy editors.

254: The number of languages tracked by the World Atlas of Language Structures Online that do not make gender distinctions in their pronouns. Of the 378 examples listed on the atlas's website, roughly two-

thirds, or 67 percent, have no gender distinctions at all for their pronouns, and those that do, like English, are most likely to use third-person singular pronouns along gender lines.

THE REAL SOLUTION TO THE SINGULAR *THEY* PROBLEM LIES IN THE HANDS OF COPY EDITORS

Last year, prominent Washington Post copy editor Bill Walsh (who was not a football coach for the San Francisco 49ers) drew a line in the sand in favor of the singular they, revealing in a deeply nerve-wracking blog post that he had been wanting to make the big change for years, despite how divisive it was for some.

“What finally pushed me from acceptance to action on gender-neutral pronouns was the increasing visibility of gender-neutral people,” he wrote.

Walsh, the author of some popular books read by copy editors, is seen as something of a trailblazer on this issue, even though he pledges his desk will use the term sparingly.

Problem is, it won’t be easy to win over everyone else in the journalism world. The issue is that many copy editors simply struggle with the conundrum that the word creates, some treating it as a pet peeve even though it’s common in regular speech.

In a blog post last year, the Baltimore Sun's John E. McIntyre noted the lingering controversy, citing one Facebook feed that called the singular they an "idiot epicene."

"I know any number of editors who share this **visceral** dislike of the singular they," McIntyre wrote. "It cuts no ice with them that linguists have demonstrated widespread use by reputable writers for centuries . . . or that we somehow contrive to use you in both singular and plural senses without growing red-faced and shouting."

visceral
from the gut; related to deep feelings rather than the intellect.

Copy editors may never find peace on this issue, even though the American Copy Editors Society has been laying the groundwork for such a change, last January noting with positivity the American Dialect Society's move to make the singular they its word of the year.

Eventually, the **Associated Press Stylebook** will make a call on this grammatical controversy, like they did when it decided to allow **"more than" and "over"** to be used interchangeably. But I wonder to myself if they'll be the last ones to figure out that most non-journalists are pro-they.

Associated Press Stylebook
the manual of grammar and style used by journalists working with the Associated Press, a U.S.-based international news organization. Style manuals explain and illustrate various rules of grammar and usage that are to be used by writers and editors. Insofar as they tell writers and editors how to use the language, they are

prescriptive.

more than *vs.* over
although most speakers of American English, even highly educated ones, often use these two interchangeably, until 2014, the *AP Stylebook* and purists claimed we should not—a prescriptivist stance. The *Stylebook* contended that *over* should be used only in references to relative size—for example, *She towered* over *her brother* —not in reference to numbers or quantities.

(Hey, at least this piece isn't about the **Oxford comma**.)

Oxford comma
so called because it is mandated by the Oxford University Press in Oxford, England; a comma used after the next-to-last element of a list and before the conjunction, as in this sentence: *Frankie brought the cake, the balloon, and the napkins*. A sentence without the Oxford comma would have no comma after *balloon*. Generally, in the United States, the Oxford comma is preferred.

Perhaps the most interesting comment on this whole issue, among the many items and eras I've quoted in this piece, comes not from a vintage study or an old academic paper, but from a Christian Science Monitor columnist who literally wrote about this very issue last week.

Ruth Walker, the writer of the publication's Verbal Energy feature, makes an astute comparison between grammar and "desire lines"—the pathways that people create on their own when the sidewalks prove inefficient paths.

Walker isn't exactly psyched about the singular they right now, but she sees the case for it going forward.

"Whatever the motivation, and however we feel about it,

singular they is a kind of shortcut through the traditional grammar rules that is coming to be more accepted all the time," she wrote. "It's like that shortcut at the library—which rejoins the main path and may someday get paved."

The tide is turning on this terminology. Whoever is getting in the way of its progress, they should stop.

RESPOND●

1. Smith provides five "language-world stances" on the use of singular *they*. Which do you find most comfortable for you? Why is this stance more appealing than the others offered? Which is least appealing? Why? Given your preferred stance, how would you acknowledge the concerns of others while supporting your own position?
2. As noted, Smith's blog post exemplifies a mash-up, a genre in which an author pulls together bits of information—quotations or even visual elements from other texts, often adding commentary of their own. (By the way, did you notice that we used singular *they* in the previous sentence: ***an author*** *. . .* ***their*** *own*? We'll bet you didn't, although your instructor may have. In earlier editions of this textbook, we likely wouldn't have used *they* but *his or her* instead. Our practice reflects how the language is changing.) How do the various parts of Smith's post work together to create an argument? What does each contribute? What, if anything, would be missing if any of the pieces of the posting had not been included?
3. Of course, the current support for singular *they* is not the

first time that efforts have been made to alter how English is used. As Smith notes, grammarians during the eighteenth century, in particular, sought to shape the language in certain ways (and were highly successful with regard to standardized written English in a number of ways). Likewise, supporters of feminism and gender equality in the 1970s began using *he and she* and finding other alternatives permitting them to avoid generic *he*. They also introduced the use of *Ms*., which has led to the almost total disappearance of *Miss* and the greatly reduced use of *Mrs*. Today, most users of English understand the use of *he* not to be a generic and assume those who use it that way are sexist, and many women, married or single, use *Ms.* These facts are evidence that language can and does change and that users can intervene to seek to alter how a language is used and understood. How do these facts challenge prescriptivist views of language that dictate the "correct" way of using language?

4. **THINKING CRITICALLY** Smith's post does not acknowledge a very real challenge with extending the use of *they* from referring to indefinite pronouns that could be male or female, like *everybody,* to referring to specific individuals, as in *Eleanor forgot their book*. In such an example, the book in question is Eleanor's alone, so the plural *they* introduces new kinds of ambiguity. How easy will it be for speakers to understand the intent during this transitional phrase of our language? How might they do so?
5. Return to your answer to Question 1, and use it as the basis for **writing a proposal argument** for dealing with the current situation, one where you seek to use Rogerian argumentation as discussed in Chapters 1 and 7. Thus,

rather than focusing on how other perspectives are wrong (and certainly rather than belittling them), seek to build as much common ground as possible and acknowledge the validity of other perspectives even as you argue for why you prefer the alternative you do.

John McWhorter (1965–), whose primary training is in linguistics, teaches at Columbia University, where he offers courses in that field, philosophy, and music history. He is also author of numerous books about language and race/ethnicity and continues to publish in a number of popular venues in a way that few academics do. This March 2016 selection is from Guernica: A Magazine of Global Art and Politics, an online volunteer-run nonprofit magazine now in its second decade. As you read, consider how McWhorter problematizes the link between race or ethnicity and language that is a defining feature of American culture.

Thick of Tongue

JOHN McWHORTER