In September 2019, Merriam-Webster updated its online dictionary, adding new words like fabulosity, pickleball, free solo and deep state. But what caught everyone’s attention in the world of legal writing was the expanded definition of they.

After the ho-hum definitions — referring to “those ones,” referring to a group of people generally and referring to indefinite singular nouns like everyone — the bombshell dropped with a fourth possibility.

They can be used officially “to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary.”

For many, the response was “Yes!” For others, the response was “No!” Readers who know me as a grammar curmudgeon might be surprised that I’m in the “Yes!” camp. No one should be surprised that I explain my response with a grammar lesson.

Grammar 101

If we are going to fight about pronouns, let’s be sure we all know what we’re fighting about. Pronouns are little words that replace nouns. (In case I just lost you, nouns are people, places, things, ideas — lawyer, court, book, freedom.) By using pronouns, we can avoid repeating a noun ad nauseam.

Suzanne read Suzanne’s book. It’s Suzanne’s.
She read her book. It’s hers.
Or, since this is obviously about me:
I read my book. It’s mine.

In the second example, the pronouns are she, her and hers.
In the third example, the pronouns are I, my and mine.

Pronouns are traditionally considered to be singular (one person) or plural (more than one person). Pronouns exist in first person (the person writing or speaking), second person (the person being written or spoken to) and third person (everyone else). Examples of singular pronouns are he and she. An example of a plural pronoun is we.

Different pronouns replace different forms of nouns. Technically these forms are called “cases,” and understanding noun cases is the one and only benefit I still derive from my high school Latin class.

Nominative pronouns, also called subjective pronouns, are the subjects of sentences.

I am a curmudgeon.
You are reading this article.
She might not agree with my recommendation.
We are each entitled to a different opinion.

Over time, pronouns move around on that handy chart. A few hundred years ago, you was plural. Only plural. A single person being spoken to was thee, not you. Over time, you crept over to the singular column, too, and now we accept you as both singular and plural.

Another set of pronouns — objective pronouns — serve as the object of a verb (receiving the action) or the object of a preposition. (If I lost you again, prepositions are little words like to and in.) The list of objective pronouns includes me, you, her, him, us, them.

Give us the briefs.
Give the briefs to us.

The last set of pronouns for today (and then I promise to stop) shows possession. Instead of Suzanne’s book, I say that it’s my book. My replaces Suzanne’s. And if I then want to state my ownership without naming the book again, I just say, “It’s mine.” Similarly, your bike is yours, her motorcycle is hers and our cars are ours.

If we put all of those pronouns into one chart, then we see where people get the lists of pronouns that sometimes appear on nametags or email signature lines (e.g., he/him/his). We are also more likely to sympathize with people learning...
English as a second language. (See Chart 2, below.)

The Nonbinary They

Even if your eyes glazed over a few times during the grammar review, they should pop open as we take a look at what Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary did in updating its usage of they.

The starting point was recognizing that some people identify as nonbinary, which Merriam-Webster defines as “relating to or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female.” From there, it was an easy step to recognize that the masculine and feminine pronouns (he/him/his and she/her/hers) are not appropriate for some.

Given the preference of some for the pronouns they/them/their and the increasing use of those pronouns in the third person singular, Merriam-Webster acknowledged what many speakers and an increasing number of writers already do: they is acceptable as a singular pronoun in some circumstances. That means them, their and theirs are sometimes singular, too.

The backlash was predictable among curmudgeons who are even more curmudgeonly than I. “They cannot be singular!” I suggest that we all use they as a singular in speech already, at least occasionally. I know I do. But while I use the singular they in conversation, it still feels awkward for me to use they as a singular in writing. Especially in legal writing.

I remind myself that a prior generation of curmudgeons believed that “Ms.” was an abomination. The proper honorifics for a female were “Miss” until marriage and “Mrs.” thereafter. Geraldine Ferraro, running for vice president in 1984, was required to choose one of the proper honorifics; being Ms. Ferraro was not an option. I remember being annoyed: Her marital status was no more important than her running mate’s was, yet no one questioned that he was simply Mr. Walter Mondale.

Singular or Plural?

Once grammarians wrap their heads around the idea of they referring to one person, the world explodes with collateral damage. Does the singular they require a singular verb? If so, they is coming would be correct. I have been told that singular verbs are proper in this instance, but I doubt the change will be common in legal writing for years to come. In fact, if I were placing bets, I’d say that the plural verb will be used with they whether it’s singular or plural. That’s what we do with you:

You are my best friend.
You are my best friends.

In the first, you is singular. In the second, you is plural. Ho hum. Similarly, in the following set, they in the first sentence refers to someone who uses the pronoun they, while in the second, they refers to two or more people.

They are my best friend.
They are my best friends.

The reflexive pronoun might also feel challenging when they is singular. (Quick refresher: Reflexive pronouns are needed when the subject and object of a sentence are the same. Each reflexive pronoun ends in -self or -selves.2) They did it themselves. They did it themself? They did it themselves? Merriam-Webster suggests the former is gaining ground.6 I have my doubts and will again lay my bets on themselves.

The Non-Universal They

Now that we know what did happen in September, let’s look at what did not happen.

First, they was not expanded all that much. It already referred to a singular person of unspecified gender, though curmudgeons like me still resist and avoid writing, “Each juror should vote their conscience.” Additionally, they was already appropriate for indefinite pronouns like anyone, no one and someone. Back in 2010, my favorite dictionary provided the example “ask someone if they could help” and noted this usage dated back to at least the 1500s.8 And that dictionary noted the singular they was becoming common, at least in less-formal contexts, for singular nouns, as in “ask a friend if they could help.”

Second, they was not anointed as an all-purpose pronoun for any and every person. Some people prefer gender-specific pronouns: she/her/hers for those who identify as female and he/him/his for those who identify as male. Those preferences should be respected, too. They is not universally applicable, as you has become.

Third, they was not announced as a substitute for every other pronoun, interchangeable at will. If a person uses the pronouns she/her/hers or he/him/his, then those pronouns should be used consistently. Similarly, if a person uses they/them/their, then those pronouns should be used consistently. A person might be fine with two sets of pronouns, listing she/her/hers or they/them/their, when in doubt, ask for a person’s preferences.

Failing to respect gender identification and to use pronouns consistently can result in confusion, as happened recently as I discussed a case with a student. The plaintiff in the case was Gloria, and the case consistently used feminine pronouns for that person. In a span of 15 seconds, the student referred to the plaintiff as she, then he, and again they. Were we discussing the same case?

If you follow the pronoun clues in reading and in conversation, you’ll likely
be just fine. Again, when in doubt, it’s best to ask.

**Conclusion**

Let’s celebrate this grammatical leap forward. One small pronoun is a giant leap for humankind — validating the identity of colleagues rather than treating them as a grammatical inconvenience. Let’s also remember that pronouns still have specific roles and use our pronouns consistently.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. In addition to updating the definition, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they), Merriam-Webster also provided commentary, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they](https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they).

2. The American Psychological Association quickly confirmed the change in its style guide, [https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they](https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they).

3. This point was covered recently in “What Quakers Can Teach Us About the Politics of Pronouns” by Teresa M. Bejan, [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/16/opinion/sunday/pronouns-quakers.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/16/opinion/sunday/pronouns-quakers.html).


5. I realize that I lied earlier when I promised that I’d present just three sets of pronouns. Pronouns in this set (truly the last for today) include myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, yourselves and themselves.


7. Often the easiest revision is to make the subject plural. Jurors should vote their conscience. (Whew! That was tough!) For more ideas, see “Finessing Gender Pronouns,” Oregon State Bar Bulletin (June 2007).