



### The Singular *They*?

For centuries, English speakers used *his* as the default possessive adjective: *Someone dropped his book*. That implies that all people are male, which is not an accurate construction. The next solution was a compound adjective: *his and her* or (worse) *his/her*. *Someone dropped his or her book*, or *Someone dropped his/her book*. That, too, failed—first because it is tedious and mechanical, creating ugly sentences, and also because in a modern inclusive democracy, the *his/her* formula excludes people who are not included in that dichotomy.

The current solution is to accept what we call the **singular *they***, creating a possessive adjective that does not delimit gender. *Someone dropped their book*. For centuries, good usage forbade that wording because it was considered a pronoun reference error, using the plural possessive adjective *their* to refer to a singular antecedent, *someone*. However, the singular *they* has now received the imprimatur of the English establishment; entities such as the MLA (the Modern Language Association) have determined that the singular *they* is acceptable English “as a generic, third-person singular pronoun” that reflects an inclusive democracy.

**Alternatives to the singular *they*:** The MLA has embraced the singular *they* as “a tool for making language more inclusive” because it avoids assumptions about gender. Nevertheless, although it is accepted, it is not elegant; it can feel like a pronoun reference error. In fact, the MLA notes that, “In formal writing, the use of singular *they* has been considered a less desirable option than revising to plural constructions or rephrasing without pronouns.” Let us look at examples of each of those:

**Singular *They*:** *Each writer has their opinion.*

**Avoid the adjective:** *Each writer has an opinion.*

**Recast the subject as plural:** *All writers have their own opinions.*

If we compare the alternatives, we see why the MLA describes the singular *they* as “less desirable.” It is not a question of whether one may use the singular *they*; it is—as it has ever been—a question of how to write a beautiful sentence.

**Solutions to pronoun reference errors:** Usually, the best solution is to replace problem pronouns with nouns. Otherwise, think and rewrite.



# From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

|                   |              |                 |                |                                  |                 |
|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
|                   | <b>He</b>    | <b>appeared</b> | <b>to</b>      | <b>despise</b>                   | <b>himself.</b> |
| Parts of Speech   | pron.        | v.              | -----adj.----- |                                  | reflexive pron. |
| Parts of Sentence | <b>subj.</b> | LVP             |                | -----S.C.-----                   |                 |
| Phrases           |              |                 |                | -----infinitive phrase-----      |                 |
| Clauses           |              |                 |                | -----one independent clause----- |                 |
|                   |              |                 |                | a simple declarative sentence    |                 |

Mary Shelley used a third person singular masculine gender subject pronoun, *he*, as the subject of her sentence, and she also used a reflexive pronoun, *himself*, that reflects back upon the subject. Notice that Shelley used a subject pronoun for the subject of the verb; that is logical, according to our rule "A subject is a subject, and an object is an object." *Appeared* is a common linking verb..

Notice that the infinitive *to despise* is regarded as one word; that is how we always treat infinitives, which we will study in depth in the chapter on phrases. We see from this analysis that the infinitive phrase is *to despise himself*; the entire phrase acts as an adjective to modify the pronoun *he*.

Notice the absence of commas in the sentence. It is not unusual to see a superfluous comma in modern writing, and such commas cause more confusion than one might think. This sentence would be ridiculous if it had a comma in any of the three possible comma locations.

Mary Shelley was a genius, the author of *Frankenstein*. She was married to a genius; her husband was the great British poet Percy Shelley. Her mother was a genius, the author Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Mary and Percy's best friend was a genius, the great British poet George Gordon, Lord Byron. It is a fascinating family to study.

*appeared*