Usage in Motion

Trace how a familiar pronoun reflects changing and contested conventions.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.1a "Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time, and is sometimes contested."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each sentence that describes a usage convention, circle each clue that shows the convention has changed over time, and number each point where people or institutions may disagree. These marks will help you distinguish rules from changing language practices.

The Changing Case of Singular They

1. In 2024, a city museum revised the labels in an exhibit about local inventors. One label described an engineer whose gender was unknown in a surviving newspaper interview. The editor replaced "he or she" with singular they: "The engineer tested their design beside the river." Some visitors recognized they as a familiar pronoun for a person whose gender is unknown. Others thought the sentence broke a rule they had learned. The disagreement illustrates a key point about usage: a form can be widely used and still be debated.

2. Singular they is not new. English writers have used they to refer to one person for centuries, especially when a person's gender was unknown or irrelevant. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, some grammar books promoted generic he, as in "Every voter should cast his ballot." That recommendation became a convention in many formal settings, including school and legal writing. It did not erase singular they from conversation or literature. A convention is a shared expectation, not a permanent law of language. When communities, institutions, and audiences change their practices, formal usage can change as well.

3. Today, many dictionaries and style guides recognize singular they. Many also recommend it for a person who uses they/them pronouns, and often allow it when gender is unknown. Yet audiences do not always agree about every use. In a research report, a writer may follow a publisher's style guide. In a legal form, the writer may need the terms required by that document. In a personal profile, respecting the individual's stated pronouns is the clearest convention. Effective writers notice the context, explain a choice if needed, and avoid treating one moment's rule as timeless.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What usage choice did the museum editor make, and why did some visitors disagree with it?

2. How does the passage show that formal usage conventions can change over time? Use the example of generic he and singular they.

3. What makes singular they a contested usage in the passage, even though it is widely recognized?

4. According to the passage, what should a writer consider before choosing pronouns in a research report, legal form, or personal profile?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 4- to 5-sentence editor's note for a school publication that explains a pronoun choice in a student profile. Explain the current convention you would follow, mention one way usage has changed or been debated, and show how the publication's context affects your choice.

ANSWER KEY

Usage in Motion

HIGH SCHOOL · L.11-12.1a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each sentence that describes a usage convention, circle each clue that shows the convention has changed over time, and number each point where people or institutions may disagree. These marks will help you distinguish rules from changing language practices. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What usage choice did the museum editor make, and why did some visitors disagree with it?	**The editor used singular they instead of "he or she" for an engineer whose gender was unknown. Some visitors believed it broke a rule they had learned.**
2	How does the passage show that formal usage conventions can change over time? Use the example of generic he and singular they.	**Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammar books promoted generic he in formal writing, but singular they continued in conversation and literature and is now recognized by many dictionaries and style guides.**
3	What makes singular they a contested usage in the passage, even though it is widely recognized?	**People and audiences do not always agree about every use of singular they. Some visitors object to it, and different settings may follow different expectations.**
4	According to the passage, what should a writer consider before choosing pronouns in a research report, legal form, or personal profile?	**The writer should consider the context and audience, including a publisher's style guide, required legal wording, and an individual's stated pronouns.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

For a student profile, I would use the pronouns the student states for themself. This follows the current convention of respecting an individual's identified pronouns. Some readers may have learned older rules, such as using generic he or avoiding singular they in formal writing. However, language conventions change, and singular they is recognized by many current style guides. Because a profile represents a real person, clarity and respect should guide the editor's choice.

Accept responses that distinguish a shared convention from an unchanging language law and support claims with details from the passage. For Part 3, accept varied pronoun choices if the student accurately explains context, change over time or disagreement, and an appropriate audience-based reason.