Words Under Review

How audience and purpose shape usage choices

L.11-12.1.a "Demonstrate the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time and may be contested."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the two expressions Maya must consider. Circle evidence that a convention has changed over time, and number two places where audience or purpose affects a choice.

The Copy Editor's Choice

1. At the school newspaper, editor Maya faces two sentences before deadline. One notice says, "If a runner loses their bib, they should ask at the desk." A concert review says, "The crowd literally exploded when the band returned." Maya cannot settle both sentences by asking whether English has one permanent set of rules. Usage conventions are shared expectations about language, and they vary by audience and purpose. A sports notice must help readers identify the right action; a concert review can be playful. Maya's job is not simply to stamp each expression "correct" or "incorrect," but to decide what each choice does for its readers.

2. Some readers object to "their" and "they" after "a runner" because the noun is singular and the pronouns can also be plural. Yet English speakers have used singular "they" for centuries when a person's identity is unknown or irrelevant. Many current style guides permit it, and people also use "they" as an individual's chosen pronoun. In Maya's notice, the instruction applies to any one runner, and the pronouns avoid assuming that runner's gender. A reader who follows an older rule might prefer "his or her," but that alternative can sound awkward and may exclude some people.

3. The word "literally" poses a different choice. Its traditional use signals that something happened in fact: "The water literally froze overnight." Writers have also used it to intensify descriptions of events that did not occur word for word, a use recorded for generations. No concert audience actually burst apart, so the review's sentence uses exaggeration. Some readers accept the dramatic effect; others find it confusing because "literally" can signal factual accuracy. Maya keeps the line in an informal review but would change it in a safety report, where readers need to know precisely what happened. A convention can be established, contested, and context-dependent at once.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why might Maya keep singular “they” in the notice even if a reader prefers “his or her”?

2. A reader claims singular “they” is a recent invention. What evidence challenges that claim, and what shows that its use is still contested?

3. A critic calls figurative “literally” a brand-new mistake. What challenges the word “brand-new,” and why might the critic still object?

4. Compare “literally” in the water sentence and the concert sentence. Why would that difference matter in a safety report?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a note to a student editor in 3 to 4 sentences. Invent one line for a school notice using singular “they” and one line for a concert review using “literally.” Say which line you would print unchanged and which you would revise, explaining your choices using what the passage says about audience and contested conventions.

ANSWER KEY

Words Under Review

HIGH SCHOOL · L.11-12.1.a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the two expressions Maya must consider. Circle evidence that a convention has changed over time, and number two places where audience or purpose affects a choice. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why might Maya keep singular "they" in the notice even if a reader prefers "his or her"?	**The notice applies to any runner without assuming gender. Singular "they" has a long history and is permitted by many current style guides.**
2	A reader claims singular "they" is a recent invention. What evidence challenges that claim, and what shows that its use is still contested?	**English speakers have used singular "they" for centuries, but some readers still object to using it after a singular noun.**
3	A critic calls figurative "literally" a brand-new mistake. What challenges the word "brand-new," and why might the critic still object?	**Writers have used "literally" to intensify nonliteral descriptions for generations. A critic might object because the word can also signal that something actually happened.**
4	Compare "literally" in the water sentence and the concert sentence. Why would that difference matter in a safety report?	**The water really froze, but the audience did not explode. In a safety report, figurative "literally" could confuse readers about what actually happened.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

For a school notice, I wrote, "If a visitor loses their pass, they should tell the office." For a concert review, I wrote, "The drummer literally set the stage on fire," though no fire occurred. I would print the notice unchanged because singular "they" has a long history and avoids assuming a visitor's gender. I would revise the review to say "The drummer electrified the room" because readers might mistake "literally" for a report of an actual fire.

Accept different editorial decisions when students explain how audience and purpose affect each line. Their explanation should recognize that established usage can still be contested.