The Pronoun Decision

How an editor resolves a contested usage choice

L.11-12.1 "In both written and oral expression: Demonstrate the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time and may be contested. Resolve issues of complex or contested usage, consulting references as needed."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the original and final notice sentences, circle the two reference sources, and box the alternate sentence Maya offers for a different style guide to track how she resolves a contested usage.

A Notice at the Radio Station

1 At the school radio station, Maya edits a notice about a missing camera: "If a caller finds the camera, he or she should bring it to the front office." Her coeditor Eli changes "he or she" to "they." Maya pauses because one caller is singular, while "they" often names a group. Eli points out that speakers have long used singular "they" when a person's identity is unknown. The choice is not a vote on whether language has rules. It is a question of which conventions fit the audience, meaning, and moment.

2 To check the change, Maya consults Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, which records "they" for a person whose identity is unspecified. She also checks the seventh edition of the APA Publication Manual, which recommends singular "they" in scholarly writing. Neither reference proves that every editor has always preferred it, or that every publication must follow APA style. Older school handbooks sometimes favored "he or she" or a plural rewrite to avoid a singular "they." Those alternatives remain understandable, but a reference can help Maya judge whether her revised notice follows an established present-day convention.

3 Maya writes the final notice: "If a caller finds the camera, they are asked to bring it to the front office." She keeps "they are," not "they is," because "they" takes the same verb form whether it refers to one person or several. If the station's style guide required a different form, she could write, "Callers who find the camera are asked to bring it to the front office." That revision avoids the singular pronoun without treating readers who use singular "they" as mistaken. For this notice, Maya chooses the direct wording supported by the references she checked.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What older convention does Maya's first draft follow, and what present-day convention does Eli suggest instead?

2. What does each reference help Maya establish, and what can neither reference require of every publication?

3. Why is "they are" the verb form in Maya's final notice, even though "a caller" means one person?

4. If the station's style guide rejected singular "they," what exact sentence could Maya use instead? How does it address the disagreement?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a three-sentence announcement about a student who loses a library book. Use singular "they" with a matching verb in the first sentence, rewrite that sentence without a singular pronoun in the second, and explain which version you would publish and why in the third.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · L.11-12.1

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the original and final notice sentences, circle the two reference sources, and box the alternate sentence Maya offers for a different style guide to track how she resolves a contested usage. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What older convention does Maya's first draft follow, and what present-day convention does Eli suggest instead?	**The first draft uses "he or she" for an unknown person. Eli suggests singular "they."**
2	What does each reference help Maya establish, and what can neither reference require of every publication?	**Merriam-Webster records "they" for a person whose identity is unspecified, and APA recommends singular "they" in scholarly writing. Neither requires every publication to follow APA style.**
3	Why is "they are" the verb form in Maya's final notice, even though "a caller" means one person?	**"They" takes "are" whether it refers to one person or several.**
4	If the station's style guide rejected singular "they," what exact sentence could Maya use instead? How does it address the disagreement?	**"Callers who find the camera are asked to bring it to the front office." Making "callers" plural removes the contested singular pronoun.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

If a student loses a library book, they are asked to tell the librarian. Students who lose library books are asked to tell the librarian. I would publish the first version because Merriam-Webster records singular "they" for a person whose identity is unspecified, and the sentence addresses one student at a time.

Accept explanations that distinguish a documented current convention from a rule every publication must follow. For Part 3, the plural rewrite should keep the announcement's meaning while avoiding a singular pronoun.