Who Does They Mean?

How context shapes pronoun choices

11-12.L.1.a "Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time and within different contexts, and is sometimes contested."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Part 1 READ AND MARK: Underline "they" in the coat-rack sign and in Morgan's staff-email quotation. Circle the sentence in which "they" leaves its referent unclear, then compare what each context tells you.

Editing the Museum Guide

1. At a city museum, a sign near the coat rack reads, "If a visitor forgets their umbrella, they can ask at the desk." The writer does not know which visitor might forget it. In this sentence, *they* points to one possible person, not a group. A volunteer preparing an audio guide hesitates: her old grammar workbook says that a singular noun must take *he or she*. Yet English speakers have used singular *they* for centuries, including in published writing. The workbook records one convention, not an unchanging law of the language.

2. In a staff email, Morgan asks colleagues to use *they* when referring to Morgan. The editor follows that request: "Morgan said they are ready to lead the tour." Here *they* refers to a particular person whose pronouns are known, not an unidentified visitor. The editor also checks for clarity. "The visitor thanked the guide after they found the umbrella" leaves readers unsure who found it. The editor revises the line to "The guide found the umbrella, and the visitor thanked the guide." Respecting a person's pronouns and making a sentence clear are compatible goals.

3. Some readers still expect *he or she* in formal prose, while many current style guides accept singular *they*. A writer might choose *they* for an unknown visitor because it is brief and does not assume gender. In a document where a pronoun could refer to several people, the writer may repeat a noun instead. These choices depend on audience, purpose, and the people being described. A convention can be debated without making every choice equally suitable: ignoring Morgan's stated pronouns would misidentify Morgan, while a confusing sentence would leave visitors guessing.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Part 2: Does the volunteer's old workbook prove that the coat-rack sign uses "they" incorrectly? Explain using the passage's account of usage over time.

2. How does the referent of "they" differ between the coat-rack sign and the quotation about Morgan?

3. Why does the editor replace the pronoun in the sentence about the visitor and the guide? Explain how the revision helps.

4. A reader objects to singular "they" in formal prose. How could the editor address that concern without misidentifying Morgan?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Part 3 YOUR TURN: Choose a setting outside the museum. In three sentences, write an original line that uses a pronoun, revise it for a different audience or context, and explain how convention, clarity, or someone's stated pronouns shaped your revision.

ANSWER KEY

Who Does They Mean?

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Part 1 READ AND MARK: Underline “they” in the coat-rack sign and in Morgan’s staff-email quotation. Circle the sentence in which “they” leaves its referent unclear, then compare what each context tells you. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Part 2: Does the volunteer’s old workbook prove that the coat-rack sign uses “they” incorrectly? Explain using the passage’s account of usage over time.	**No. Singular “they” has been used for centuries, so the workbook records one convention rather than an unchanging rule.**
2	How does the referent of “they” differ between the coat-rack sign and the quotation about Morgan?	**On the sign, “they” refers to an unknown visitor. In the quotation, it refers to Morgan, a particular person who has stated their pronouns.**
3	Why does the editor replace the pronoun in the sentence about the visitor and the guide? Explain how the revision helps.	**“They” could mean either the visitor or the guide. The revision names the guide as the person who found the umbrella.**
4	A reader objects to singular “they” in formal prose. How could the editor address that concern without misidentifying Morgan?	**The editor could repeat Morgan’s name or revise a sentence to avoid a pronoun, but should not replace Morgan’s stated pronouns with different ones.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A club email says, “If a member loses his key, he should tell the treasurer.” For a public membership form, I would write, “If a member loses a key, that member should tell the treasurer.” Repeating “member” makes the instruction clear without assuming that every member uses “he.”

Accept revisions that accurately explain how audience, clarity, or a person’s stated pronouns affects the choice. For Part 3, check that the response has three sentences, includes an original line and a revision, and explains the change.