

'They' are plural - but 'they' are also singular: read on

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■ Our columnist recalls a colleague who always referred to students as 'he or she' when talking generally... and never 'they'.

Picture: PA

I don't have to sit on committees any more, but I sometimes do still have nightmares about a former English university colleague who insisted that all official references to students should use both the masculine and feminine pronouns: "any student who does not complete his or her work..."; "if a student fails, then he or she must...".

This was an improvement on the earlier situation where our students were referred to as he, him, his even though most of them were female. But I argued that his wordings were incredibly cumbersome and that we should use they, them, their instead: "if a student fails, then they must...". He hated this idea, pontificating that it would be wrong because "they" is plural, so it cannot refer to a single person.

Now the pronoun "they" is plural, of course, but it can also be singular. English speakers have been able to use it for hundreds of years as a highly convenient way of referring to a single person when that person could be either male or female. We have examples of this from written English going back to at least the 1300s. From 1526, we find "If a psalm escape any person, or a lesson, or else

they omit one verse or twain...". Here the pronoun referring to "any person is "they", because obviously a "person" can be male or female, and writing "they" is a lot more sensible than writing "he or she".

Singular "they" is entirely normal, very common and utterly correct. Jane Austen and Shakespeare used it.

The Oxford English Dictionary states that "they" can be used in "reference to a singular noun or pronoun of undetermined gender: he or she; especially in relation to a noun phrase involving one of the indefinite determiners or pronouns 'any, each, every, no, some, anybody, anyone'". You can tell

it truly is singular by the way in which speakers sometimes say things like "anyone who hurts himself" rather than "...themselves".

In fact, singular "they" is so normal in grammatical constructions involving indefinites like "any" that we use it even when we do know the sex of the unknown person being referred to. Before the election of the current pope, BBC reporters were using expressions such as "whoever the next pope is, they will have to...".

So it was my colleague who was mistaken. If you have such a colleague, do tell them they are wrong.