

The Writing Lab

Agreement

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

An agreement error means that one part of your sentence is singular, and one part is plural. In most cases, a sentence should be consistent in terms of number (singular or plural – not both).

- The **bag** of toys **are** on the table in the kitchen >>> This sentence has an agreement error because “bag” is singular (1), but “are” is plural (more than 1).
- The **bag of toys is** on the table in the kitchen. >>> This sentence is correct because “bag” and “is” are both singular.
- The **toys are** on the table in the kitchen. >>> This sentence is correct because “toys” and “are” are both plural.

- My **three dogs** have driven me crazy this summer with all of **her** barking >>> This sentence has an agreement error because “three dogs” is plural, and “her” is singular.
- My **dog has** driven me crazy this summer with all of **her** barking >>> This sentence is grammatically correct because “dog” and “her” are both singular. However, the sentence is factually incorrect because I have three dogs, not just one.
- My **three dogs** have driven me crazy this summer with all of **their** barking >>> This sentence is now correct because “three dogs” and “their” are both plural.

- I honestly don’t get **all** of **these** Pokémon Go **fans** and the lengths **he** will go to find those monsters. >>> This sentence has agreement errors because “all,” “these,” and “fans” are plural, but “he” is singular.
- I honestly don’t get **this** Pokémon Go **fan** and the lengths **he** will go to find those monsters. >>> This sentence is correct if the Pokémon Go fan is male (“he”).
- I honestly don’t get **all** of **these** Pokémon Go **fans** and the lengths **they** will go to find those monsters. >>> This sentence is correct because “all,” “these,” “fans,” and “they” are plural.

A Word about Personal Pronouns and Biological Sex

Traditionally, a personal pronoun used to describe a human being was expected to match the word it was replacing in terms of **biological sex** (male or female) and **number** (singular or plural). For example, all singular pronouns in English that refer to human beings are coded for biological sex (his/hers, he/she, him/her). While the word “it” is a pronoun that refers to a singular noun and doesn’t reference biological sex, “it” is reserved for non-human nouns. Increasingly, there are situations where the biological sex of a noun is either unknown or doesn’t fit into a purely male/female categorization.

So, what to do? Honestly, this issue of using they/them/their in place of singular personal pronouns (his/hers, he/she, and him/her) is controversial. Some readers will consider such usage as grammatically incorrect because the sentence includes both singular nouns and plural pronouns. Others will find the usage completely acceptable. In many cases, there is a very easy solution: Just write the entire sentence in the plural to begin with if possible. For example, note the two sentences below. There isn’t a great deal of difference in meaning between the two:

- **A writer** who wants to improve **his/her? their?** writing should go to the Writing Lab.
- **Writers** who want to improve **their** writing should go to the Writing Lab.

However, in cases where the noun must be singular and the biological sex of that noun is either unknown or doesn't fit into male/female categorization, you have to choose. While more professional publications and organizations encourage the use of the plural pronouns (they/their/them) to refer to singular nouns, some people will find this practice grammatically incorrect regardless of your intentions to use accurate or inclusive language. I encourage my students to write the entire sentence in plural whenever possible. However, if that won't work and if the biological sex of the noun is unknown or doesn't fit into a male/female categorization, I support using the plural pronouns (they/them/their). I am all for good grammar; however, I support language that is inclusive and respectful of people's identities more. However, this is ultimately a choice you need to make for yourself.

Indefinite Pronouns

The issue of pronouns coded for biological sex comes up here too. Another group of pronouns is called indefinite pronouns which include words such as another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, enough, everybody, everyone, everything, little, much, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something. These indefinite pronouns can be tricky because even though they may sound plural, they are grammatically singular. Here are three ways to handle this information:

- **Everyone** who went to the concert last week got **his/her ticket** refunded when the band didn't show up. >>> "Everyone," "his/her," and "ticket" are all singular.
- **Everyone** who went to the concert last week got **their ticket** refunded when the band didn't show up. >>> "Everyone" and "ticket" are singular; however, the plural "their" is permitted.
- **Fans of the Foo Fighters** who went to the concert last week got **their tickets** refunded when the band didn't show up. >>> "Fans," "their," and "tickets" are all plural. Note that the word "tickets" now needs to be plural. Otherwise, the sentence is saying that all of those Foo Fighters fans originally bought **one** ticket.

Here is another example:

- **None** of my cousins wants to sleep in **his/her bed** tonight because there is a thunderstorm, and **he/she** is frightened. >>> "None," "his/her," and "he/she" are all singular.
- **None** of my cousins wants to sleep in **their bed** tonight because there is a thunderstorm, and **he/she** is frightened. >>> "None" and "he/she" are both singular; however, the plural "their" is permitted.
- My **cousins** do not want to sleep in **their beds** tonight because there is a thunderstorm, and **they are** frightened. >>> "Cousins," "their," and "they" are all plural. Note that the word "beds" needs to be plural. Otherwise, the sentence is saying that all of those cousins shared **one** bed.

My Best Advice

This issue of using they/them/their in place of singular pronouns is controversial. Some readers will consider such usage as grammatically incorrect because the sentence includes both singular and plural terms. Others will find the usage completely acceptable. If writing in more formal situations or for writers who seem very traditional in their language, use, I would work to keep your sentence all in the singular **or** all in the plural.

In most cases, there is a very easy solution: Just write in the plural to begin with. There isn't a significant difference between the two sentences; both versions are in agreement with each other. Everyone wins.

- A **writer** who wants to influence **his/her** readers will pay attention to issues of agreement.
- **Writers** who want to influence **their** readers will pay attention to issues of agreement.