

OPINION COLUMN and LETTER TO THE EDITOR

An Opinion Column, also referred to as an Opinion Piece or Opinion Article is a form of Feature Article. A feature article can have a range of topics from how to do something to best places in the world to visit. They can be about politics, current events, lifestyle, etc. The author usually gives his opinion, either directly, or in the form of advice (we NEVER see this in a News Report).

A specific type of feature article is the opinion piece. A journalist who writes opinion pieces for newspapers is called a columnist and often writes on specific themes based on area of expertise or experience. Please remember that it is a feature article, but that it is based around the writer's opinion. It will not usually be about pop culture or lifestyle, but about somewhat more important issues (although you can see them about sports and other topics as well). The purpose of an opinion column (or editorial) is to expand the debate around an important political or world issue.

Because an opinion column is a type of feature article, it follows the same rules as feature articles do. There is a headline, but no restrictions on grammar. There is no W5 paragraph or inverted pyramid, but it involves information and opinion quite heavily.

Here are some possible headlines / topics you might see:

The Problem with Nukes in North Korea

The Key to Sustainability

We Need to Wake Up to Climate Change

Discrimination is Alive and Well in National Sports

These types of Opinion Articles will have as a main element the opinion of the writer or columnist. A regular feature article will have the writer's opinion, but it may not be the central point of the article, but it will be in an opinion piece.

The writer's name (and sometimes photograph) is included after the headline. It is common that a column be a weekly feature in a newspaper or magazine and that it has a name, for example:

Murphy Muses

State of the World

Ups and Downs in Sport with John Smith

Mind over Matter, a Look at Modern Health Care by Deborah Chase

See a sample Opinion column that sent for online publication in 2019 on the next page.

A Grammar Teacher on Pronouns

By Sean Lacey
November 23, 2019

One of the most fundamental discussions concerning gender identity of late is the use of appropriate pronouns when referring to people who may not fit into society's binary ideas of gender. This has not been without its hurdles. The idea that sexuality and gender are not intrinsically and irreversibly linked is something that people may still grapple with, but progress is constantly being made in many arenas and is an important talking point for schools to make with children. I know of schools which we would expect to be progressive and forward thinking, but still actively promote binary gender identities in their students from Kindergarten onwards. That means there is still work to be done and the use of non s/he pronouns may be further away in some arenas than others, but the discussions still must be had; they are important, even essential.

I write this reflection as both a member of the LGBTQ2 community and as a grammar teacher. I never saw a conflict between those two things until now. So many of the people I have spoken to have a problem with using "they" as a non-binary pronoun for people who identify as such. He and she simply do not suffice as all-encompassing pronouns for a world population as diverse as the shape of snowflakes. Our language fails us here, which it often does in many respects. It is important to know that no language is perfect, as they carry historical, prejudicial and social constructs with them as they age. Language, after all, is a way to describe the world; everything we know about the world, and indeed the universe is carried on our language, including our identity. That's how important it is.

So, where is the conflict? Why do people have so much discomfort when using "they" as a gender non-specific pronoun? For me, I am very happy to have a pronoun for this use. As our culture and values change, so does our language. It is a victory for English to accommodate this, as it linguistically opens its arms to people of non-binary genders and sets a place at the language table where will sit people who have been starved for recognition and acceptance for millennia. My problem is in the choice of words. I understand why we use the word they, as it reflects someone whose gender is unknown (when used as a singular), "Someone has forgotten their phone." Grammatically, this works since the subject of the sentence is "Someone", a singular pronoun; use of the word "their" tells us the someone is unknown, but the sentence is generally understood to be about one person, particularly with the singular verb. However, what happens when you use "they" for one person

whom you know? Is it "they is" or "they are"? I never learned this rule in my studies of grammar, because it didn't exist when I studied grammar and probably because, as a rule, it still doesn't. The combination of words "They is" simply does not roll off the tongue so easily when it has been so deeply and for so long, ingrained in us that this is a grammatical mistake (of the most basic kind). Is this why so many people have trouble with it? Does the fact that we either have to use a plural sounding pronoun with a singular verb OR both a plural pronoun and plural verb to speak about someone in the singular make it so unwieldy? I'm not sure anyone has satisfactorily answered these questions, and if they have, it doesn't make it roll off the tongue any more easily. It simply feels unnatural to refer to one person as they or them.

I have heard many people support this use of "they" on two grounds; one is that it already exists in English language and two, that it sufficiently serves as a gender-neutral pronoun. I have outlined in the previous paragraph the discomfort on a grammatical level. The second discomfort is in the use of the word gender-neutral. This is a term I am happy to use about restrooms, but not about people. I remember when I was young hearing trans people or other members of the LGBTQ2 community referred to as "it", because it denoted either the absence or plurality of their gender, but, of course, in a derogatory manner. "It" is our singular gender-neutral pronoun in English, but it dehumanizes people and makes them sound like objects, of less value than actual people. Therefore, the argument that "they" suffices as gender-neutral, hits me hard in both ways.

Is there a solution? Some people refer to the pronoun "sie" from the German. "Sie" in German has three possibilities - "she", "You" or "they". Since "sie" meaning "she" is already binary, this doesn't work. "Sie" as in "you" doesn't work because we do not need a pronoun in the second person, only in the third, as the problem is in describing people we are talking about, not those we are talking to (everyone can be referred to as "you" in English in the second person without fear of offending anyone). "Sie" as "they" brings us right back to square one. "But that's German!! Who cares, as long as we have our usable pronoun? English borrows words from other languages all the time!" First of all, the plural of "sie" in German is still "sie", but with a different verb form. What will be the plural form of "sie" in English? This hasn't been worked out. What will be the objective form (instead of him, her or them)? A non-binary pronoun needs to be workable in all its forms. Even

though we may have to stop and remember to use it, at least it won't get tangled in the grammatical complexity. In any case, these days the English words are the ones most commonly borrowed. It would be far better to have a pure and operational pronoun here for others to borrow without lending them the grammatical awkwardness of "they" in the singular.

What, then, is the solution? I have recently seen the German "sie" transformed into "ze", then "hir" for the objective, followed by hir, hir and himself for the remaining forms, all sounding very close to her, herself, etc. The sound is as important as the spelling. Speaking is thousands of years older than writing after all, and it's in the utterance that we get tongue-tied, an apt word. Perhaps the solution is two-fold. First the pronoun needs to be fully operational in all forms without lexical,

grammatical, or aural discomfort. LGBTQ2 people have been uncomfortable long enough. Why not simply invent a pronoun that that plays with ze, so that she/he, her/him, hers/his, her/himself becomes something like ze, zin, zins and zinsself. We needn't worry about the plurals since they are already non-binary. These have some English flavour and draw on both the German and the English. I'm not saying it should be these specifically, but it should be SOMETHING, something that everyone can agree on, which is the second part of the two-fold issue. This is not a discussion that has not been had before and there have been many ideas put forth. My idea is that a pronoun set is chosen and accepted, so that there isn't a confusing plethora of possibilities which are easy to confuse and that it grammatically works in the brain. The idea is to remove the discomfort of LGBTQ2 people and of everyone else in the process.

What is the main opinion expressed in the article?

What are some of the solutions to the issue?

Why are most of the solutions not feasible?

What does the writer suggest that the best solution might be

Who is the audience? What is the purpose? What is the register (and why)?

Identify new or difficult words and expressions and list them below.

Plan an opinion piece of your own.

As indicated above, an editorial opens or expands the debate on a particular subject of current importance, and is published in a newspaper, either online or a physical newspaper. A text type that is attached to the editorial is the LETTER TO THE EDITOR. People often write into the newspaper to respond do an editorial. It is a formal letter (see formal letters as a text type) and is addressed to the editor.

You should include at least the date, "Dear Editor" and your name. The rest of the letter follows the formal letter text type:

- 1 Date
- 2 Dear Editor
- 3 Paragraph 1: State why you are writing. You may briefly include your opinion here.
- 4 Paragraphs 2, 3 and 4: Reasons for your opinion and expansion on the topic.
- 5 Paragraph 5: Close the letter with a recommendation or statement of opinion.
- 6 Thank you and signature

Here is a sample letter to the editor:

December 01, 2019

Dear Editor:

I am writing about the editorial entitled A Grammar Teacher on Pronouns written by Sean Lacey in your November 23 edition. I would like to ask if this opinion is shared by you and by this newspaper and whether the author has considered carefully the history of the English language.

Firstly, he makes his point clearly about the comfort of using pronoun forms that follow grammatical norms (I assume he means modern English here, but has not stated such; we can assume he means this). I grant him this point, in that part of the problem with our modern non-binary pronouns is that there is some awkwardness in using them in everyday situations.

However, I would like to point out that the use of “they” in the third person in fact DOES follow both the modern and historical norms of English grammar. We must remember that our modern use of the word “you” in the singular never existed before the 13th century (<https://www.quora.com/>). English speakers simply moved the plural form into singular usage, just as we are doing with “they” in English in the 21st century. It is simply a matter of adapting our language to suit our society, a point also made by the author in November. The word “they” now has become so ubiquitous that it made Merriam-Webster’s word of the year for 2019; it cannot be that uncomfortable if it has already made it this far. The CBC (along with countless other news agencies) have published this and I attach here the very CBC article containing a most enlightening interview between a senior editor at Merriam-Webster, Emily Brewster and CBC radio journalist Carol Off:

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/merriam-webster-declares-they-its-2019-word-of-the-year-1.5391018>

The interviewee here, explains very clearly why “they” as a singular non-binary pronoun serves the English language and its speakers so well. While I understand the points Mr. Lacey makes in his editorial, particularly from a grammarian’s point of view, I argue that this modern piece of linguistic evolution will one day seem so natural to us, that an etymologist may one day have to remind us that we didn’t always have it.

I urge all readers of your publication to adopt this view and to make things more comfortable by using “they” more, instead of less, not just to speed up language change, but to show solidarity to those members of our community who do not feel represented by our language.

Respectfully yours,

Terry Boyle