“They” as singular
Acceptable? Optimal?

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“They” as singular – Acceptable? Optimal?

In popular use, the pronouns “they” and “their” are often used to refer to plural and singular antecedents.

“All engineers must submit their own reports before noon today.”

and

“Each engineer must submit their own report before noon today.”

This practice can avoid sexist language; however, writers must be careful to avoid ambiguity if the referent of “they” is ambiguous.

Consider the following two sentences:

The engineer, who has three degrees, was uncertain if they were what the hiring commission wanted.

or

The engineer, with three degrees, was uncertain if he was what the hiring commission wanted.

In the first sentence, the referent of “they” is unclear because it could refer to either “engineer” or “degrees.” The second sentence avoids the ambiguity.

Some popular uses of “they” as a singular pronoun can seem awkward, as shown in the quotation below from a NBC news affiliate:

“One man is dead after they attempted to cross Interstate 74 to talk with another driver following an accident.”

Although “they” is commonly used in popular media as both singular and plural, many technical publications still observe the grammatical rule that pronouns should agree with their antecedents.

Is an artist obligated to reveal how much of his or her creativity is being assisted by technology?

and

Always complete the booking through the site’s secure payment processing system. Never agree to a host’s request to transfer money to his or her bank or to pay in cash when you arrive—even if he offers a discount or other compelling reason.
Four Ways to Make Pronouns Agree Without Being Sexist

Writers and speakers can cast their sentences to maintain pronoun agreement and avoid sexist language in four ways: 1) use the phrase “his or her,” 2) if possible make the referent (noun) plural, 3) interchange “he” and “she” if the referents are general, 4) revise the sentence so that pronouns are not necessary.

Base sentence:
After the user presses the return key, they can enter the field value.

1) Using “he or she”:
   After the user presses the return key, he or she can enter the field value.

2) Make the referent noun plural:
   After users press the return key, they can enter the field value.

3) Interchange “he” or “she” if the context is generic.
   After the user presses the return key, she can enter the field value.

Other needed singular pronouns in the paragraph in which this sentence would also use “she” as a generic singular pronoun. In the next paragraph, the writer could use “he.”
   When tabulating the data, the user must ensure he has included all updates from previous fields.

4) Drop the pronoun.
Base sentence (repeated):
   After the user presses the return key, they can enter the field value.

Several options based on context and intent:

a) The user can enter the field value after pressing the return key.

b) The field value can be entered after the user presses the return key.

c) After the return key is pressed, the field value can be entered.

d) After pressing the return key, enter the field value.

Transposes the action from the base sentence; may be more cohesive if the actions are given sequentially.

The first part is passive voice.

All passive voice; the agent (user) is dropped.

Second-person voice, if it can fit the context.