

Using ‘they’ and ‘them’ in the singular

*Every employee is expected to be at **their** desk by 9.00.*

This is an example of what is often referred to as ‘singular they’.

The grammatical subject—*every employee*—is singular, as is the verb *is expected*, but the following pronoun, *their*, is plural. Hence the name. It happens when *they*, *them*, *their*, and *themselves* refer back to subjects that are grammatically singular:

*It was every teen for **themselves***

When does it happen?

This construction often occurs after words such as:

- *each*
- *every*
- *any*
- *anyone/anybody*
- *everyone/everybody*
- *nobody/no one*
- *someone/somebody*
- *whoever*

that are used to make indefinite or general statements, without specifying the individual concerned.

***Each and every one** of my colleagues at the university will express **their** own opinion.*

*I feel that if **someone is** not doing their job it should be called to **their** attention.*

***Everyone was** absorbed in **their** own business.*

***Nobody wants** to return to the car park and find that **their** car has been clamped.*

Why do people use it?

At first glance, such mismatches appear to flout the normal rules of agreement, and that is why many people object to them. However, many of these words, for example *everyone*, can be thought of as plural in meaning, albeit grammatically singular, so semantically there is not really a mismatch.

Additionally, the practical reason that people often use this form of words is if you are referring to someone of an unknown gender, to use *he*, *him*, *his*, etc. is nowadays considered sexist. Using *them*, *they*, or *their* is a way to avoid making an assumption of gender as there is no gender explicit in these pronouns. Find out more about gender-neutral language. Second, people prefer not to use **he or she**, **him or her**, etc. because they are long-winded and can be distracting, especially if they have to be repeated several times in the same sentence or paragraph.

Is it grammatically correct?

Despite objections, there is a trend to use ‘singular they’. In fact, it is historically long established. It goes back at least to the 16th century, and writers such as Shakespeare, Sidney, Byron, and Ruskin used it.