

Newsletter of the Ventura County Writers Club



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Joy's Noise:

How to Break Rules and Get Away With It

By Joy Greenberg

In past issues of the VCWC's *Write Stuff* I initiated and continued a conversation about how writers can become their own best editors by being mindful of some of the most common errors I see as a professional editor. But with the New Year and the astute suggestion of *The Write Stuff* editor **Carol Malone** comes a new format idea for my monthly contribution, which we are calling **Joy's Noise**.

In **Joy's Noise**, instead of reminding you of the exceedingly boring details of grammar and style, as I did for *How to Become Your Own Best Editor*, and in an attempt to be *au courant*, I'd like to create for you a blog in which I *show* rather than *tell* what constitutes good writing, which does not always follow the rules, as you probably know. So instead of teaching about *following* rules, please allow me to comment about *breaking* them.

As the great poet-novelist Margaret Atwood has said, it is okay to break the rules of grammar as long as you know what they are and have a good reason for doing so. For example, one reason to break a grammar rule is because your character's speech is meant to be colloquial, and it might sound pompous or pedantic for the character to use proper speech.

Example: The person who cleaned my house left *their* bucket behind.

Here "person" is singular, so *his* or *her* (singular pronouns) are correct, but your character would sound obsessively nitpicky if s/he spoke this way.

You will demonstrate that you know the rule when you use it correctly outside your character's speech, or better yet, *avoid* having to break the rule by writing a sentence without using a singular pronoun:

Example: The person who cleaned my house left *a* bucket behind.

Which leads me to what I characterized in my article in the February issue of *The Write Stuff* as what could be the most frequently misused pronouns in the English language: *they/ them/ their*, collectively known as the **Singular They**.

Many scholars agree that the reason why *their*, along with its counterparts *they* and *them*, has been co-opted as a substitute for *his* or *her* and variants (*his/ her, s/ he, he/ she, him/ her*) is because speakers tend to shy away from these gender-specific words in their attempt to be *politically*, if not *grammatically*, correct.

I disagree; I think those who use **Singular They** do so to be *colloquially* correct. They are confused (or *cornfused*, as my dad used to say). They understand that *he* is no longer acceptable as a generic singular pronoun, and *he/ she* or *she or he* are simply too clunky for casual speech. In addition, *he/ she* has been used in the past as a pejorative descriptor for cross-dressers and transgender identifiers. When speaking, I knowingly use **Singular They** because saying any of the correct alternatives makes me sound nitpicky. In fact, **Singular They** use has become so common that most people don't even recognize its incorrectness.

But does democracy rule over grammar? And does *political* correctness take precedence over *grammatical* correctness? **Bill Walsh**, editor for *The Washington Post*, thinks so and claims that the **Singular They** is "the only sensible solution to English's lack of a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun." One of my *JSRNC* editorial colleagues, who teaches at Fairfield University, further elaborates:

In particular, **Singular They** facilitates a wider range of non-gendered constructions which is particularly apropos at this moment in cultural studies and critical theory, where gender binaries are no longer considered gender neutral, and thus can be controversial. In other words, favoring *they* over *his/ her* not only better resembles conversational English, it is also more inclusive of gender-queer audiences.

Yet, neither commentator considers grammatically correct alternatives, such as *it/ its**, nor do they offer the possibility of revising the sentence to avoid *needing* the **Singular They**.

Example: The person who cleaned my house left *its* bucket behind. (We use *it/ its* for animals, so why not for humans? And many erroneously refer to people as *that*, rather than correctly as *who* or *whom*, as I pointed out in the February issue of *The Write Stuff*, so why not *it* for people?)

Breaking rules should not be done merely for expediency. Just because a few academics think the **Singular They** is okay doesn't make it so, especially in writing, which is not as dependent upon speed as is speech. Ultimately, the question arises: Should English grammar simply become "whatever is convenient"? If so, we may as well have no rules at all.

Please feel free to comment on these or other proofreading matters that concern you. I may be reached at jhg@joyhornergreenberg.com. You may also visit my [website](#) to see references for and reviews of my editing and proofreading skills; to read an excerpt from my memoir, *A Pause in the Rain*, and to read my published articles and blogs, including *The Write Stuff* series.

*Thanks to **Maceo** and **Laura Greenberg** for pointing out *it/ its* to me.