

Vocabulary Practice Point #4
Grammatically-Correct and Gender-Inclusive English

Question: In English class, I learned that “everyone”, “no one”, “everybody” and “nobody” are conjugated in the singular. (As an example: “Everyone should take his seat.”) Why do English speakers incorrectly say “Everyone should take their seat”?

Answer plus Discussion:

(1) “Everyone should take their seat” is incorrect because “everyone” is an indefinite pronoun conjugated in the singular. For example, “*Everyone eats dinner at 6 p.m.*”

(2) The difficulty arises when the same sentence uses a possessive pronoun (his, her, its, their), thus forcing the speaker to pick a gender. (“*Everyone should take **his** seat*” or “*Everyone should take **her** seat.*”)

(3) Some English-speakers find “his” male-dominant and offensive, while others believe that “her” is feminist or militant, when referring to groups with both genders.

(4) We avoid this conflict by making the subject plural, and using the possessive pronoun “their”, which is not gender-specific. Here are two examples:

Construction	Critique	Gender-Inclusive Alternative	Rationale
Everyone should eat his dinner.	The possessive pronoun “his” excludes women.	All persons should eat their dinner.	As a possessive pronoun in plural form, “their” covers both men and women.
A person must follow her instincts.	The possessive pronoun “her” excludes men.	People must follow their instincts.	As a possessive pronoun in plural form, “their” covers both men and women.