confidence, either as default or backup style manuals.

Earlier, I suggested that everyone should read their default style manual “from front to back, every single page, at least once a year,” the reason being that, in our day-to-day work and in our leisure reading of printed materials, we are constantly exposed to erroneous English usage and punctuation. Over a period of time, seeing the same things done incorrectly over and over, our eyes begin to accept such abominations; consequently, and without realizing that it’s happening, we begin to accept as correct that which we previously knew to be incorrect. By constantly refreshing our knowledge of correct usage, we are engaged in the honorable process of resisting the corrosive effects of dumbed-down English usage and punctuation.

Using the default method described above, also choose a default standard dictionary and a default medical dictionary, and defer to them in the same fashion as you defer to your default style manual.

Life is short and deadlines loom. While the adoption of the default method won’t lengthen your life, it will increase your consistency and accuracy; it will increase the speed with which you edit your transcripts; and it will settle, once and for all, the question of who’s in charge here. Your defaults are.

Who’s in charge here? Your defaults are.

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LEDERER ON LANGUAGE

Sex and the Singular Pronoun
BY RICHARD LederER

You’re sitting at a table and after a long period of time elapses, someone finally brings the food. Why are they called the “waiter”?

I’ve used this quip dozens of times in my talks and have asked the audience if anyone has been offended by any grammatical atrocity I have uttered. Almost no one raises their hand.

Yet some purists grow apoplectic about the use of the pronoun they to refer to indefinite pronouns, such as anyone, each, and everybody, or with singular nouns, as you’ve just experienced (without trauma, I reckon) twice in the previous two paragraphs. Why is this usage ubiquitous? One reason is that we have been doing it for centuries, all the way back to Middle English. It’s been more than 600 years (1387) since Geoffrey Chaucer wrote, in The Canterbury Tales, “And whoso findeth hym out of swich blame/They wol come up....”

It was not until the 18th century that they in its third-person singular role was disparaged. That’s when such grammarians as Robert Lowth (yes, he of the anti-split-infinitive league) and Lindley Murray decreed that indefinite pronouns are singular. The reasons for this linguistic holding were more cultural than structural. In 1746, for example, John Kirky’s Eighty-Eight Grammatical Rules included as Rule No. 21 that “the male gender was more comprehensive than the female.”

Thus we confront the matter of sex and the singular pronoun. While all other pronouns avoid reference to gender, the third-person singular pronouns in English — he and she — are gender-specific. We are not fully comfortable with the male chauvinist “Each student should underline in his textbooks so that he can achieve his fullest academic potential” or the clumsy “Each student should underline in his or her textbooks so that he or she can achieve his or her fullest academic potential.” They has long been a graceful solution to the most nettlesome problem in sexist language — the generic masculine pronoun — and to the grammatical stutter engendered by dancing back and forth between the sexes: “Each student should underline in their textbooks so that they can achieve their fullest academic potential.”

They has been moving toward singular senses, in the manner of you, which can function both singularly and plurally. That’s the way we do it — and by we, I mean we caring and careful speakers and writers. We’ve been doing it for centuries, and we’re doing it today.

• Everyone attended the party, and they had a rockin’ time.
• If somebody wants to cut class, we can’t stop them.
• The cellular customer you have called has turned off their phone.
• We are required by law to post the pharmacy’s number on the medication vial in case the customer has questions about their drug.

The astronomer Galileo Galilei was branded a heretic because he insisted that the Earth was not the center of the universe but, in fact, revolved around the sun. Despite his perilous status, Galileo urged others to conduct objective experiments so that they could see the truth for themselves.

Gentle reader, please open your ears and eyes. Listen and look for statements that contain an indefinite pronoun or a singular noun and hear and see what pronoun follows. In almost every case that pronoun will be a form of they. We do that because the device is historically tested. We do that because it is more graceful than “he or she.” And we do that because it avoids making a minority of us the linguistic norm and a majority of us a linguistic afterthought.

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Glossary

Earthquake Glossary

acceleration
accelerogram
accelerograph
acceleration graph
accretionary wedge
active fault
aftershocks
alluvium
amplification
amplitude
arc
aseismic
asperity
asthenosphere
attenuation
backarc

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