The Politics of Grammar
Handbooks: Generic He and Singular They

Sharon Zuber and Ann M. Reed

The state of Virginia currently distributes an Employment Commission form instructing the claimant to “file claims in accordance with instructions given him as long as he is unemployed and feels he is entitled to benefits.” A paragraph later, the form states: “If you feel it is necessary to engage an attorney, you must pay for his services.” Clearly “generic he” is alive and well in spite of recent efforts to sensitize people to its implications. According to traditional prescriptive grammar, all of us, whether male or female, are treated as grammatically masculine, and the feminist critique of language confronts a long tradition of writing the world male.

However, finding acceptable alternatives for “generic he” has not been simple. Writers sometimes devise confusing solutions from the available choices. A student writes, “When the player runs on the field, his/her cleats catch on the more coherent astroturf and he/she falls on their face.” Even professional writers can be daunted: “You should throw the ball into the troublemakers’ court and ask him or her to test their suggestion against the group” (article in Northwest magazine cited by Miriam Meyers 232). Where does this confusion arise? Many students and professionals base their decisions about nonsexist language on writing courses. In Miriam Meyers’s 1990 study of current generic pronoun usage, she concludes that the “instructor serves as primary audience and coach for the writer and is the first institutional gatekeeper” of acceptability (234). The widespread use of handbooks in first-year writing classes and as reference books for

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writers attests to their influence and their importance in any study of the forces for and against language change.

Clearly, handbook writers themselves confront political and social issues in their choices. One of the most important decisions emerges in their advice about pronoun use. When the antecedent for a pronoun is indefinite, especially someone, anyone, everyone, and each, writers have three choices, the traditional "generic he," "he or she," and what has come to be called "singular they." And, as Elizabeth Sklar observes, "When we choose our pronouns we are inevitably making political statements" ("The Tribunal of Use" 411). During the 1970s and 1980s, with the revitalization of the women's movement and the development of sociolinguistic theory, it became clear that the choices in a sentence like the following reflect distinctly different attitudes towards sex and class:

Everyone should mind his business.
Everyone should mind his or her business.
Everyone should mind their business.

In Textualizing the Feminine, Shari Benstock argues that we "often dismiss as perfunctory the work of grammar or punctuation. We read 'beyond' devalued cursory forms or details, interpreting the message emblazoned on the textual façade, often ignoring the bricks and mortar that support its edifice" (xv). By examining the bricks and mortar, we can chart the effects of language change. Like others (Dennis Baron, "The Epicene Pronoun"; Miriam Meyers), we assert that the proscription of "singular they" impedes nonsexist writing. The same tradition that established "generic he" proscribed "singular they." Following Sharon Zuber's 1990 observations of growing strictures against "singular they" during the late 1980s in the Harbrace Handbook statements, we extended her analysis to incorporate other popular college handbooks: The Beacon Handbook, Strunk and White's Elements of Style, The Little, Brown Handbook, The Macmillan College Handbook, The Random House Handbook, and The St. Martin's Handbook. In each case, we noted the addition or deletion of sections on nonsexist language; the use of "generic he" and "singular they"; the level of prescriptivism; and the reasons cited for usage.

In the following discussion, we begin by tracing the historical development of handbooks' authority and their current status as powerful, although not always accurate, monitors of language. We then focus on the linguistic evidence that most speakers of English continue a centuries-long tradition, in both speech and writing, of using "singular they" with indefinite antecedents, a practice proscribed by the handbooks. Finally, in light of the growing criticism of "generic he," we relate the handbooks' continued proscription of "singular they" to their social and political construction, revealing a tension between demands for language change and the authority of tradition.
The Authority of Handbooks

Attempts to conserve authority proliferate in times of political and economic upheaval, and linguistic authority is no exception. In eighteenth-century England, the codification of English grammar helped to maintain class distinctions. A threatened aristocracy could preserve its status by distinguishing itself grammatically (Terry Eagleton, The Function of Criticism; Olivia Smith). Grammars also served to "defend the language from 'decay'" (Postman and Weingartner 49), in other words, from change associated with those who threatened the social order. Elizabeth Sklar suggests, moreover, that England's imperialist position in the eighteenth-century world depended in part upon the status of its language as "masculine" ("So Male a Speech"). In response to perceived threats to established social hierarchies, to Britain's imperial role, and to male dominance, grammars appeared in unprecedented numbers: Sklar observes that more than 200 were published in England between 1750 and 1800 ("Sexist Grammar" 351).

In American educational institutions, the second half of the twentieth century is comparable to the second half of the eighteenth century in England that produced those early grammar handbooks (Eagleton, Literary Theory, Chapter 1, "The Rise of English"; Stephen M. North). In The Rhetorical Tradition, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg argue that many contemporary academic rhetoricians "date the rejuvenation of rhetoric to the sixties, when [a] burst of theory, combined with campus political activism, led to self-evaluation and efforts at disciplinary renewal" (901). Moreover, during the 1960s and 1970s, many American colleges and universities established open-admission policies that seemed to threaten traditional higher education.

At such historical moments, when established power structures perceive themselves as threatened, forces arise to define and create coherence. In the newly formed writing courses, taught by adjunct or junior faculty, grammar, previously taught either as linguistic analysis or in conjunction with (but clearly secondary to) literature, realized new status. The writing handbooks produced in response to this growing composition industry served the same conservative purpose as grammars had in eighteenth-century England. One need only refer to Walter Meyers's 1991 usage study of fifty handbooks published between 1980 and 1990 or look at the increase in the number of grammar handbooks published since 1960 (Table 1) to feel the strength of this institutional force.

Although this table includes only those texts used in our survey, a more comprehensive chart would show an increase in the sheer number of texts published in the 1970s and 1980s. This increase corresponds to their demand in growing first-year writing programs, reflecting one of the effects of open-admission policies. The frequency of handbook revisions in recent years reveals the conflict between forces for language change and the tradition of authority.
Table 1 Increased Publication of Writing Handbooks—1941–1992

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<tr>
<th>Text</th>
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<tr>
<td>St. Martin's</td>
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<td>Strunk/White</td>
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<td>Harbrace</td>
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These twentieth-century handbooks, like their eighteenth-century counterparts, propose to provide consistency, accuracy, and a common background for discussion about language. As references, handbooks record the rules and regulations governing a language and serve as convenient guides for specialists and nonspecialists alike. However, in spite of good intentions, a long stream of evidence suggests that their seeming objectivity masks the specific social and historical contexts in which they were constructed. At worst, the handbooks represent conformity which denies cultural and creative diversity and obscures gender, racial, and class power struggles. In Authority in Language (1985), James and Lesley Milroy point out that, unlike racial and sexual discrimination, “it appears that discrimination on linguistic grounds is publicly acceptable” (3).

Kathleen Welch, in arguing that first-year writing texts seem to ignore current composition theory, notes: “Language prescription . . . has a momentum of its own and serves some important purposes” (278), not the least of which is political. Handbooks play an important role in the control of language, control that Richard Ohmann argues extends beyond the university by providing American capitalism with efficient, consistent communicators. In spite of Welch’s contention that handbook writers make the best of a bad situation, she emphasizes that “the authority of the printed page persuades our students with every turn of a leaf that writing exists beyond the usual constraints of relationship, history, lines of thought, and conditions of belief” (273). Too often handbooks promote rules of standardization outside the students’ linguistic experience. These rules form the basis for correction by teachers and editors trained in the system, who pass on the training to their students. Handbook writers see their job as conservation, not invention.

The lingering tendency to treat handbooks as if they were bibles reveals their continuing authority in the United States. In fact, some English teachers appear to forget that grammars, too, are written by human beings. As Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner put it, “they seem to believe that a grammar is something
that is just there, like the seasons, or the tides, or the stars" (45). This perception of naturalness, in part, results from publications that merely borrow from each other and thus may reassert years of linguistic misinformation (Thomas Nunnally; Gary Sloan).

For more than half a century linguists have been noting the discrepancies between actual language use and language prescription in handbooks. As Walter Meyers submits, handbook usage items often “reflect mainly personal quirks and crotchets of the compilers” (342) rather than objectively researched entries. He accuses the handbook authors of prescribing a level of formality that ignores the multidimensional contexts in which humans actually use language. Both Walter Meyers and Thomas Nunnally plead for handbooks to be more responsive to recent linguistic scholarship, without which their authors merely preserve outdated information. Meyers specifically wants usage glossaries to become more scholarly: “They need to tell students what we know about usage, not what we guess about it, and certainly not what was guessed about it a hundred years ago” (355). Sloan suggests that the handbooks used by writing instructors “are not necessarily reliable guides to the practice of skilled contemporary writers. . . . Between the handbook prescriptions/proscriptions and actual practice may lie a considerable gulf” (305).

**Generic He and Singular They**

Until the mid-eighteenth century, English grammarians wrote little about agreement between pronouns and antecedents of indefinite gender. According to Ann Bodine, J. Kirby in 1746 was the first grammarian who advocated the use of *he* as a generic pronoun: “The masculine Person answers to the general Name, which comprehends both Male and Female; as, Any Person, who knows what he says” (J. Kirby, A New English Grammar [1746], qtd. in Bodine 135). Bodine considers this precept “an unusually early and very incipient form of the attack on singular ‘they’” (135). Kirby was followed, however, by many others; there was a “virtual explosion of condemnation of singular ‘they,’” states Bodine (136), coinciding with the late-eighteenth-century increase of grammars previously discussed. Ultimately it took an Act of Parliament in 1850 to establish the legal use of *he* to refer to a singular sex-indefinite antecedent. Bodine reads this Act, ostensibly intended to promote economy of expression in written documents, as a political move forcing language to perpetuate a male-dominated social structure. For over a century after this, prescriptive grammarians on both sides of the Atlantic continued to promote the use of “generic *he*.”

In the past two decades, however, a steady flow of criticism of the gender bias inherent in “generic *he*” has emerged in the linguistic and psycholinguistic literature (Bodine; Maija S. Blaubergs; Wendy Martyna; Donald Mackay; Deborah
Cameron; John Gastil; Casey Miller and Kate Swift). With few exceptions, the professional literature supports the claim that someone hearing or reading a sentence like Every student should do his best will perceive the referent of student to be male. Many conclude that such sentences reinforce gender stereotypes and patriarchy, prompting an institutional response in the form of a large number of guidelines for nonsexist writing: the arbiters of scholarly conventions (NCTE, MLA, APA) all counsel avoidance of “generic he” (see also Alleen Pace Nilsen, “Guidelines Against Sexist Language”).

Although antiseexist and egalitarian impulses drive these guidelines, eschewing “generic he” is not a revolutionary move. Since it was originally mandated by grammarians and widely resisted in popular practice, “the movement against sex-indefinite ‘he’ is actually a counter-reaction to an attempt by prescriptive grammarians to alter the language” (Bodine 131). Moreover, the alternatives recommended by these institutional guidelines have their own limitations. Writers are urged either to change the antecedent to a plural noun or to use “he or she.” Neither solution is satisfactory. Even writers strongly opposed to sexism endorse “he or she” only half-heartedly. They complain about its cumbersomeness, particularly in repeated uses (Nilsen, “Winning the Great He/She Battle”). Beyond this, the inevitable primacy of the masculine pronoun in the sequence seems to reintroduce sexism in another form; from a psycholinguistic perspective, Gastil concludes that “he or she” may still prompt a primarily masculine interpretation for male readers.

What the English language needs is a truly epicene singular pronoun, one belonging to both sexes, as both Dennis Baron (“The Epicene Pronoun”) and Elizabeth Sklar (“Sexist Grammar Revisited”) have noted. The most natural candidate for such an epicene pronoun is “singular they.” The use of they with a singular indefinite antecedent has been a part of English since at least the sixteenth century (Bodine; Whitley; Baron, “The Epicene Pronoun”), good enough for Shakespeare, Swift, Austen, Shelley, Dickens, Trollope, Shaw, and many others (Lundberg). Despite the strenuous efforts of prescriptive grammarians to promote an androcentric pronoun system, even to legislate it in the 1850 British Act of Parliament, twentieth-century linguistic studies of oral and written American English consistently find they a likely choice for speakers of both sexes (see also Sterling Leonard; Miriam Meyers; and Gary Sloan):

Contemporary Spoken Examples (M. Stanley Whitley; Walter Meyers)

No one went to her funeral, did they?
Everyone likes me, don’t they?
Every naturalist has their favorite adaptations.—Steven Jay Gould
I mean someone who uses threats . . . to achieve their goals.
—A. Gerschowitz, Harvard Law School
Contemporary Written Examples (Walter Meyers)

When you love someone, you do not love them all the time.  
—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

No one thinks the things described here will ever happen to them.  
—widely distributed anti-drug advertisement

If a person uses part of their capital to make more donations than usual . . .  
—Christian Science Monitor

Usage studies beginning in the 1930s (Edward Finegan) have shown that panels of educated writers and editors, when asked, consistently find some instances of “singular they” acceptable. In particular, as Martha Kolln and Elizabeth Sklar (“The Tribunal of Use”) have shown, in a coordinate or independent clause which follows the clause containing the indefinite antecedent, as in (1) and (2), or at the end of a tag question, as in (3), they is not only accepted but preferred to a semantically singular pronoun, like he. (Following the conventions of linguistics, the asterisk marks unacceptability.)

1. Everyone agreed to come, but when the time comes they/*he will be busy.
2. I don’t think anyone raised a fuss; they/*he must have been worried about losing their jobs.
3. No one can disagree with us on this, can they/*he?

Sklar notes that the use of singular “they” in these sentences stems from the animacy of the pronouns everyone, anyone, and no one. Inanimate antecedents, as in (4), do not commonly trigger “singular they”:

4. Something is bothering you, isn’t it?

She concludes that they is associated with animate antecedents, where the choice of be or she would limit the gender of the referents:

with an animate/human antecedent . . . we can have either number agreement (singular) or gender agreement (indefiniteness) but not both. Given the choice between agreement in gender and agreement in number, we evidently choose gender over number—in this case, gender indefiniteness. (“The Tribunal of Use” 419)

The linguistic research indicates that most English speakers and writers, including the educated, use “singular they” in a variety of constructions. Why then, returning to Baron’s focus, has “singular they” not been accepted as the generic pronoun in English? The answer lies in its proscription in the few problematic constructions that preoccupy handbooks and some red pens, those where the antecedent and pronoun are in the same clause or where the pronoun is the subject of a complement clause:

5. Everyone should mind their own business.
6. Someone said that they would help us move.
Kolln notes that the possessive cases, as in (5), predominate in handbook discussions, and Sloan (and others) confirm that they occur as “errors” in college students’ writing. The use of *they* in sentences like (5) and (6) is traditionally proscribed. Grammarians, content to ignore the mass of cases where “singular they” is used, have claimed that indefinite pronouns like *everyone* are inherently singular and must, in line with their logic, require a singular pronoun.

However, as Bodine, Miriam Meyers, and others have demonstrated, these uses of “singular they,” like the acceptable uses in (1)–(3), have persisted in speech and in writing for centuries, and the prohibitions against such uses are, in Sklar’s terms, “systematically violated in speech by all but the most self-conscious speakers of American English” (“The Tribunal of Use” 411). Most speakers will say (5) and (6), but many educated speakers will avoid or notice these constructions in writing. This difference between speech and writing stems from the role of linguistic authority in the writing of the educated. Using a singular pronoun in sentences like (5) and (6) has come to be a marker of educated writing (and in some cases speech).

As we have seen, the writers of handbooks have a stake in conserving their linguistic authority. Although the bulk of linguistic evidence suggests that “singular they” is the generic pronoun in English, with a long tradition of use, a handbook writer would have to challenge another tradition of authority to sanction its use in writing. In the past two decades, however, the need for handbook writers to establish guidelines for nonsexist language has increased the pressure for such a challenge.

**Current Handbooks’ Response to Inclusive Language**

Not surprisingly, handbooks published from the 1950s until well into the 1970s assumed without question or with enthusiasm the use of “generic he” with an indefinite antecedent. Note the statement from Harbrace 1962:

> In standard English use a singular pronoun to refer to such antecedents as *man, woman, person, one, anyone, anybody, someone, somebody, everyone, everybody, each, kind, sort, either, neither, no one, nobody.* (68–9)

The writers take for granted that the reader will accept without question the use of singular “generic he” in such cases as their example: *An outstanding trait of primitive man was his belief in superstitions* (69). Even in 1977, in a new section on “Avoiding Offensive Language,” the author of the Random House Handbook, Frederick Crews, wistfully proposes that its generic meaning has just recently been lost:

> Traditionally, that indefinite person has been “male”: *he, his, him,* as in *A taxpayer must check his return carefully.* For the centuries in which this practice went unchal-
lenged, the masculine pronouns in such sentences were understood to designate, not actual men, but people of either sex. (113; still in 1987 edition, 212)

Perhaps the last holdouts, Strunk and White, who had made the same assumptions as Harbrace in their 1959 edition, in 1979 felt obliged to add:

The use of he as pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. He has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances. The word was unquestionably biased to begin with (the dominant male), but after hundreds of years it has become seemingly indispensable. It has no pejorative connotation; it is never incorrect. Substituting he or she in its place is the logical thing to do if it works. But it often doesn’t work, if only because repetition makes it sound boring or silly. (60)

By evoking a tradition “rooted in the beginnings of the English language” or at least “hundreds of years” or “centuries” old, these handbook writers ignore the struggle over usage that Bodine’s historical analysis discloses. In so doing, they perpetuate belief in the underlying grammatical structures of language as unchanging, universal.

As sections on nonsexist language were added during the late 1970s and early 1980s, many texts adopted a more critical view of “generic he,” with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Although Sklar points out that 50 percent of the texts she surveyed in the 1980s did not deal with “the issue of gender agreement and its social implications” (“The Tribunal of Use” 420), many did add guidelines for avoiding “generic he,” like those of St. Martin’s Handbook:

Remember to avoid using masculine pronouns to refer to antecedents that include or may include both males and females. For example, the sentence Every attorney values his client’s testimony implies that only men are attorneys. Such a sentence can be revised in several ways: by eliminating the pronoun, by using both masculine and feminine pronouns, or by shifting to the plural. (1989, 244)

However, like Random House, some undercut the generally accepted guidelines in various ways:

Unfortunately, none of these solutions can be recommended with much enthusiasm. Continual repetition of he or she is cumbersome and monotonous; most readers would regard A taxpayer must check their return as a blunder, not a blow for liberation. . . . My view is that it’s a bad bargain to be forever proving your advanced attitude at the expense of your reader’s concentration and ease. Your instructor, however, may see the matter differently. (1977, 113)

Interestingly, while early handbook writers deferred, inaccurately, to a “practice” or “convention” that was “centuries old,” by the 1970s they refer to reader response and instructor preference to help writers choose the appropriate alternative. By 1990, however, tradition will reclaim some of its authority over these rules.
The realization that “generic be” would no longer be universally acceptable should have forced handbooks to address pronoun agreement and the use of “singular they.” In the sections of handbooks dealing with pronoun agreement, the traditional prohibition of “singular they” conflicts with actual usage and the demand for change. We find that the handbook sections on pronoun agreement treat “singular they” in one of three ways: ignoring or denying it; acknowledging it in speech but not in writing; or tentatively suggesting its use in writing.

An example of the approach which ignores the possibility of they as a choice for students appears in The Macmillan College Handbook:

The indefinite pronouns...usually take a singular pronoun.... A special problem arises when the subject refers to human beings. His traditionally refers to both men and women: Each of us is donating his salary for the benefit. To show that the statement also refers to women, many speakers and writers specify both men and women: Each of us is donating his or her salary. Another solution is to use a plural subject: All of us are donating our salaries for the week. (1987, 302)

This passage fails to mention “singular they” as an option that students might consider—an omission of their most frequently used alternative from speech.

The second approach, acknowledging the use of they in speech but denying its acceptability in writing, appears in Little, Brown 1983:

In speech we often solve the problem of the generic he by combining a plural pronoun with an indefinite pronoun, as in Everyone brought their books to class. But this construction violates the expectations of most readers, so it should be avoided in writing. (195)

The edition also reminds readers that when referring to a “singular” indefinite pronoun with plural reference,

In speech we commonly avoid such awkwardness with a plural pronoun: After everyone left, I shut the door behind them. In all but the most informal writing, however, you should rewrite the sentence: After all the guests left, I shut the door behind them. (195)

No reason is given for this difference between spoken and written language.

The last approach, tentatively suggesting the use of they in some writing, appears in Harbrace 1986:

Increasingly, however, writers are using plural pronouns to refer to singular antecedents that denote both sexes or either sex.

In fact, the fear of growing old is so great that every aged person is an insult and a threat to the society. They remind us of our own death.—Sharon Curtin

As you make choices about pronouns referring to singular antecedents such as everyone and a person, consider not only your own preferences but those of your audience. (68)
St. Martin's (1989) also tentatively suggests this approach when discussing the example: “Everyone had their own theory about Marcia’s resignation”:

You will probably hear—and perhaps use—such sentences in conversation, but you should be careful about using them in writing. Although this usage is now gaining some acceptance, it is probably a good idea to talk to your instructor to see what he or she advises before using it in academic work. (223)

In these examples handbook writers avoid a strict prescriptive position, yet they advise students that “good writers” follow the rules carefully described in handbooks (Sloan; Sklar, “The Tribunal of Use”). In somewhat different advice to the instructors of these students, the St. Martin’s Handbook includes the following examples of “singular they” in its Annotated Instructor’s Edition (1989):

Everybody to rest themselves take.—Shakespeare
Everyone in the house were in their beds.—Henry Fielding
A person can’t help their birth.—William Thackeray
It’s enough to drive anyone out of their senses.—George Bernard Shaw
Anybody is as their land and air is.—Gertrude Stein
No man or woman can hesitate to give what they have.—Woodrow Wilson (223)

The editors then pose the question, “Should you pair the singular every with the plural their, a practice that is falling into general usage?” These inconsistent messages, marginally noted for the instructor, can only add to the confusion of instructors and students. In a similar vein, the Instructor’s Annotated Edition of the Little, Brown Handbook (1992) advises students that indefinites like everyone are singular while informing instructors about Kolln’s “radical” claim that neither logic nor practice supports their singularity (257).

Our most surprising observation is a recent shift away from tentative acceptance of “singular they.” Strikingly, in the later 1980s and early 1990s, some handbooks that had taken a more permissive view of “singular they” actually returned to a more prescriptive view:

Little, Brown 1986 and 1992: But many readers view this construction as wrong, so it should be avoided in writing (206).
Harbrace 1990: [Section on “singular they” omitted leaving only a prescriptive statement] (69).

In 1983 Little, Brown advised writers to avoid the use of “singular they” because “this construction violates the expectations of most readers,” whereas in the above example, readers “view this construction as wrong.” Although subtle, the change from “expectations” to “wrong” signals a shift back to an enforceable standard.

In the 1992 St. Martin’s instructor’s edition, this confusing advice follows the written examples of “singular they”:
This lineage notwithstanding, it is now apt to be considered incorrect by many readers. However, because it provides a simple solution to many problems of sexist usage, it is becoming more and more widely accepted in academic and formal writing. For the moment, it is probably most prudent to counsel students to seek out other alternatives to the generic use of masculine pronouns. (232)

The students receive the following advice:

You will probably hear—and perhaps use—such sentences in conversation, but be careful about using them in writing. Although this usage—everybody with “the plural pronoun their—is now gaining some acceptance, many readers will consider it excessively informal or even incorrect. Everybody is grammatically singular and hence calls for a singular pronoun. (233; our underlining)

Thus, the more recent editions of Little, Brown, Harbrace, and St. Martin’s reflect a backlash against the use of “singular they.” By privileging number over gender, handbook authors have reverted to the traditional rationale established by the 1850 Act of Parliament, effectively hiding linguistic discrimination.

**CONCLUSION**

Clearly, grammar handbooks have (in some cases reluctantly) abandoned the claim that “generic he” is the only appropriate pronoun for an indefinite antecedent. Often citing the response of readers to sexist speech or the need to include women, they now consistently encourage the use of plural antecedents or “he or she.” At the same time, they continue to deny students the use of the most natural generic pronoun, “singular they.” This proscription is based on an appeal to an authority constructed to maintain gender and class inequities.

The reasons for this backlash are complex. Marketplace considerations must be added to gender and class issues already mentioned. Consumers may pressure handbook writers and publishers to maintain the authority of grammar rules. In “Composition Textbooks: Publisher–Author Relationships,” W. Ross Winterowd estimates that in the lucrative textbook market “a successful college rhetoric . . . can be expected to sell about 40,000 copies a year” (143) and argues that “the first concern of editors is what their potential customers want, rather than what they need” (140). If we accept his argument, then some handbook customers want to continue the proscription of “singular they,” to continue linguistic discrimination.

Sensitivity to market demands may also account for the standard grammar handbook losing status to competing process-oriented texts and collections of essays. Texts that still call themselves handbooks, such as The St. Martin’s Handbook, devote the opening chapters to the writing process. This de-emphasis of handbook rules could indicate that they will exert less authority in the theory and
teaching of writing. However, burying grammar rules at the back of books also makes them less visible and less likely to be revised to reflect current usage.

Competition among tradition, consumer needs, and current usage results in confusing advice. Betty Lou Dubois and Isabel Crouch frame these inconsistencies in terms of "linguistic disruption," a symptom of the early stages of language change (28). In one instance, handbook authors justify eliminating "generic he" by revising to plural antecedents or to "he or she" on the basis of reader response. This reasoning implies that a writer's choices may be governed by audience considerations. In contrast, by denying use of "singular they," well established in the speech of most students, the handbooks deny choice through the authority of tradition. This continued proscription of "singular they" directs students' attention away from language as socially and politically constructed, language as responsive to change.

In the case of "singular they," handbooks ignore the professional literature in linguistics and in composition, which for several decades has indicated the discrepancy between actual linguistic practice and the handbook proscriptions. Walter Meyers's statement that handbook usage glossaries should be more fully researched and responsive to current scholarship can be extended to grammar rules as well. Students need to know that no grammar is airtight—"all grammars leak" (Edward Sapir 38).

Several writers (Walter Meyers; Donald Stewart; M. Stanley Whitley) have spoken out against removing language rules from their context, asserting that students should have some understanding of language history and development. Clearly, handbook writers have not embraced this advice. In fact, the St. Martin's Handbook, which in 1989 contained a subheading "History of English" in its table of contents, had by its 1992 edition de-emphasized it as a passage under "Vocabulary." Contextualizing grammar rules reveals how all languages change, even if slowly, in response to cultural needs. An accurate discussion of the current use of "singular they" would be a big improvement over what we find in most handbooks. Accepting it as a respectable alternative to "generic he" would be even better.

Handbooks can and do change in response to language practice. Correct English can be seen from a larger perspective as flexible, variable, and audience-sensitive without disintegrating into chaos. Handbooks are not bibles. They contain rules that should be responsive to the variety and growth in a language.

WORKS CITED


Handbooks Surveyed


