"I don’t know what this professor wants."
It is a common issue writing center consultants encounter when working with students. This complaint can surface at any stage of the writing process, but it often comes after a draft has been submitted and comments have been returned. Students may feel that they have recited the correct terms and applied the proper procedures, and yet their submissions fall short of what the instructor "wants" or "is looking for." Identifying a paper's audience is vital to setting the tone and trajectory of the work. Many students take the default position that the instructor must be the audience. He or she has, after all, assigned the project and is the one responsible for grading it. In this scenario, the students may envision the instructor as an omniscient audience who only wants his words and ideas
parroted back. This false perception removes any incentive for the student to thoroughly investigate or analyze subject matter.

By embracing the idea that the instructor is their only audience, student writers impose unnecessary and often counterproductive limitations upon themselves. The writing assignment, in this case, becomes merely a "demonstrative task" rather than a true investigative piece (Gopen 25). This is by no means a suggestion that students should ignore their instructors' opinions, ideas, evidence or expectations. Instead, this approach seeks to expand the scope of the audience to include peers as well as professors, neophytes as well as experts. This also frees the writer to more fully analyze material and offer a new and exciting perspective that might otherwise be obscured by dense layers of quotes and underdeveloped ideas.

How then does this idea of redefining the audience affect our practice in the writing center? As consultants, we are bound by the requirements of the assignment and we cannot reinterpret the instructor's directions. However, we can encourage students to think more critically, ask more questions and see their project as more than just their part of an academic bargain whereby they receive a diploma or degree in exchange for a predetermined amount of work (Gopen 28). We can illustrate to students how their work can be a platform for their ideas and feelings to be genuinely heard. We are not the audience, but we are an audience; our job is to ensure students' writing stays true to their nature while also being accessible to a range of readers.

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Every year, a panel of grammar and English language experts from the American Dialect Society votes on the “Word of the Year.” This got me to thinking about what word I would choose if given the opportunity.

I concluded that I would select a word that encouraged pondering and reflection. What about singularity? At what point do astronomers consider a singularity to begin? How about spaghettification? If you were unfortunate or inattentive enough to fall into a black hole, exactly how much of your physical being would be compacted, stretched or expanded? What about the Zen concept of manifestation, the notion that there is no birth, death or even creation? This idea alone invites us to relax without distraction and mentally explore the word.

There are other words and phrases that, no matter how often people attempt to explain them, I still do not have a clear understanding of what they mean. How, for example, can disingenuous mean what we're told it means? Although I understand that begging the question is a type of logical fallacy, why is it called that?

Instead of these candidates, the experts awarded their 2015 Word of the Year title to they. It seems that the panelists chose it because, for years, it has been confounding writers, pestering instructors and stirring glee in the hearts of red-pencil-wielding editors. This is largely because they is supposed to refer to plural nouns, as in:

When the presidents lined up for photos, they all wore smiles.

However, the long-standing controversy is over whether they can also be used in place of gendered singular pronouns such as he or she, as in:

When a patient cannot afford treatment, they are referred to the support office.
Traditionally, using *they* in this fashion would be considered grammatically incorrect. A more acceptable sentence would be:

When a **patient** cannot afford treatment, **he** or **she** is referred to the support office.

However, language is constantly evolving and, because many people currently use the former construction, the red-pencil crowd seems to be relenting and granting more respectability to the singular *they*. Congratulations to *they* and thank you, grammarians, for making the job of writing center consultants just a little easier.

**Another Word about Singular "They"**

by Heather Wright

Many have lauded the **American Dialect Society’s** choice of singular *they* as Word of the Year for 2015, even if it violates traditional grammar rules. Just think how cumbersome it is to have to say or write something like "If he or she wants, he or she can pick up his or her paychecks later today" on a regular basis. Increased clarity and brevity are certainly valid reasons to support the use of singular *they*, but there is another important reason to consider this construction. Since English has historically lacked a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun that includes gender-non-conforming individuals, *they* fills this void.

A person may choose to be referred to as *they* instead of *he* or *she* if the singular *they* gives people the option to express themselves more fully and provides an alternative to the *he/she* dilemma in situations where a person’s gender is unknown or not relevant. As a result of the American Dialect Society’s decision, social media has prompted an influx of comments regarding this powerful four-letter word. In the words of Hal Schnee on Facebook, "The change of language reflects society’s changing views and understanding of..."
gender and gender identity. Since language tends to evolve in order to better describe the world, it is not surprising that the singular they is becoming more popular.

Gender-neutral third-person singular pronouns have been proposed, before although none have enjoyed as widespread usage as singular they. In fact, English is not the only language facing this issue and it is not the only language trying to resolve it. Sweden has recently added the word hen to its official Swedish language dictionary as an alternative to the masculine han and the feminine hon (Noack).

For English speakers, singular they is a multifunctional word. It allows us to produce sentences that are less unwieldy but it also accomplishes much more: it acknowledges rather than erases people who do not strictly identify as male or female. Singular they is a valuable option that is gaining wider acceptance.

It acknowledges rather than erases people who do not strictly identify as male or female.

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