

English Grammar: Pronouns for Undefined Gender

How would you translate these phrases to English?

- Temos um novo funcionário. Chegará amanhã às 8h.
- Tem alguém na recepção. Está esperando por você.
- Tem uma pessoa na frente da casa. O que ela quer?
- Nosso novo professor de inglês começa hoje. Não sei se é inglês ou não.
- *Through a door*: A: Oi. Quem é? B: Sou eu, Pedro.

Here is a list of English pronouns and possessive adjectives:

People (Singular)			
I	me	my	myself
you	you	your	yourself
he (M)	him	his	himself
she (F)	her	her	herself
People (Plural)			
we	us	our	ourselves
they (M or F)	them	their	themselves
you	you	your	yourselves
Objects or Animals (Singular)			
it	it	its	itself
Objects or Animals (Plural)			
they	them	their	themselves

The pronouns 'he' and 'she' are called 'gendered pronouns', as they respond to specific genders. However, when we don't know the gender of a person, we use genderless pronouns and possessive adjectives:

it	it	its	itself
they	them	their	themselves / themself

Examples:

- A: There is somebody at the front door.
B: Who is **it**?
A: I have no idea – but if you open the door, you will see who **it** is!
- We have a new employee. **They** will arrive tomorrow at 8am. I will ask **them** to come and see me, as I need to get **their** details.

In this modern world, "gender neutral" people are becoming more common, so the words "it" and "they" are becoming more common to refer to them.

More examples:

- *Telephone rings:* “Who is **it**?”
- *Wife answers telephone, and husband says:* “Is **it** your mother?”
- *Visitor arrives, you identify the person and tell others:* “Look! **It**’s John.”
- *I arrive unexpectedly:* “Hello! **It**’s me!”
- There is somebody outside. **They** are waiting for me. I’ll talk to **them** to see what **they** want.
- My new boss arrives today. I hope that **they** are nice!
- *Poster on a wall:* The winner of the lottery should take **their** ticket to a lottery office, where **they** can find out how to collect **their** prize.
- A: There’s somebody here to see you.
B: Please tell **them** that I’ll be there in ten minutes.

Compare these responses:

- A: There is a **man** at the door. B: Who is **he**? What does **he** want?
- A: There is a **woman** at the door. B: Who is **she**? What does **she** want?
- A: There is a **person** at the door. B: Who is **it**? What do **they** want?
- A: There is a **person** at the door. B: Who are **they**? What do **they** want?

Vehicles such as cars, boats and ships are frequently referred to using female pronouns. Boats and ships usually have female names. For example:

- “I christened my boat on Saturday. **She**’s called *Lady Gray*.”
- “I bought a new car. **She**’s very comfortable.”
- “The ship arrived yesterday. **She**’s in dock number 8.”

Some writers refer to “a person” as “he” and other writers use “she”. Here is an example taken from the book “Sapiens” by Yuval Noah Harari:

If God knew in advance that a particular person would use her free will to choose evil, and that as a result she would be punished for this by eternal tortures in hell, why did God create her ?

Suggested video: <https://english.insl.com.br/files/videos/Undefined-gender.mp4> (short)

Exercise. Complete with 'they', 'them', 'their' or 'it'.

1. I will have an extra student this afternoon, but I don't know _____ name.
2. Our new English teacher begins today. I don't know if _____ are English or not.
3. When you see your teacher, please give this note to _____
4. A: There's somebody at the door. B: Who is _____?
5. I want to review the salary of the new intern. What is _____ current salary?
6. If the elected politician wants to increase taxes, _____ will face a lot of opposition.
7. If somebody wants to drink alcohol in the USA, _____ must wait until _____ are 21 years old.
8. *Answering the phone:*
 - Simon:* Hello?
 - Peter:* Hello, _____'s Peter, can I speak to Bob, please?
 - Simon:* Hi Peter. Sure, no problem. One moment please.
 - Shouting:* Bob! _____'s Peter, he wants to speak to you.
 - Bob:* OK. Thanks. I'll be right there.
9. If anyone gets 100% in this test, I will give _____ a gold star!
10. A: We have a new student joining us today.
 - B: Great! How old are _____?
 - A: _____ are ten years old.
 - B: Do you know what _____ name is?
 - A: _____ name is John.
 - B: When will **he** arrive?
 - A: **He** will arrive very soon.