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Language



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THE USAGE PANEL

The Usage Panel is a group of nearly 200 prominent scholars, creative writers, journalists, diplomats, and others in occupations requiring mastery of language. Annual surveys have gauged the acceptability of particular usages and grammatical constructions.

[The Panelists](#)



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he ¹  (hē)

Share:

pron.

1. Used to refer to the male person or animal previously mentioned or implied.

2. *Usage Problem*

a. Used to refer to a person whose gender is unspecified or unknown: *Someone left his umbrella in the lobby.*

b. Anyone: “*He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence*” (William Blake).

n.

A male person or animal. Sometimes used in combination: *Is the cat a he? We saw a he-goat cross the road.*

[Middle English, from Old English *hē*; see **ko-** in the Appendix of Indo-European roots.]

Usage Note: Historically, the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* have been used as generic or gender-neutral singular pronouns, as in *A novelist should write about what he knows best* and *No one seems to take any pride in his work anymore*. Since the early 1900s, however, this usage has been criticized for being sexist in its assumption that the male is representative of everyone. As long ago as 1987, a majority of the Usage Panel indicated that they preferred to avoid the generic use of *he*. Certainly the avoidance of this usage has become common at all levels of formality. Typical strategies for doing so include using the plural (that is, avoiding the singular entirely), so *they* is used instead of *he*. This is probably the easiest solution. (The matter of using *they* to refer to singular antecedents is addressed in the usage note at the entry for *they* in this dictionary.) Writers can also employ compound and coordinate forms such as *he/she* or *he or she*, though these constructions can be cumbersome in sustained use and exclude nonbinary individuals who use singular *they*. Some writers, especially in academic contexts, use *she* in alteration with *he* to balance the genders, or they use *she* exclusively, in what might be seen as a pointed overturning of tradition. The writer who chooses to use generic *he* and its inflected forms in the face of the strong trend away from that usage may be viewed as deliberately calling attention to traditional gender roles or may simply appear to be insensitive. · In certain sentences, the generic pronoun can simply be dropped or changed to an article with no change in meaning. The sentence *A writer who draws on personal experience for material should not be surprised if reviewers seize on that fact* is complete as it stands and requires no pronoun before the word *material*. The sentence *Every student handed in his assignment* is just as clear when written *Every student handed in the assignment*. See Usage Notes at [each](#), [every](#), [neither](#), [one](#), [she](#), [they](#).

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he ²  (hā)

Share:

n.

The fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. See Table at [alphabet](#).

[Hebrew *hē*, of Phoenician origin.]

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abbr.

1. Her (or His) Excellency
2. high explosive
3. His Eminence

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He

Share: [Tweet](#)

The symbol for [helium](#).

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Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

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The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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