BEN: Hey, Barbara, wait up.

BARBARA: Hi there, Ben.

BEN: I was wondering if you could help me figure something out.

BARBARA: What sort of thing?

BEN: A grammar thing.

BARBARA: Sure, what's the problem?

BEN: Well, I'm writing an article for the school newspaper. Nothing fancy, just a review of the drama department's production of The Glass Menagerie. And I interviewed one of my friends, Elliott, who attended the show, just to get some audience perspective.

BARBARA: That's solid journalism.

BEN: Thank you. The problem is that I'm not sure how to refer to my friend, pronounwise. Elliott doesn't identify with one side or the other of the gender binary. I mean, Elliott doesn't really feel entirely a boy or entirely a girl, so calling Elliot he or she wouldn't be quite right.

Elliot prefers to go by they. I know from my composition course that they is a plural pronoun, so grammatically it can't be used to describe a singular subject. Is that true?

BARBARA: Great question. There's a little controversy surrounding this issue, because conventions have definitely changed over time. The short answer is that yes, you can use they to refer to a singular person. Most language and style experts agree that the convention around the plural pronoun they is changing.

BEN: I'm glad to hear it. What's the long answer, though?

BARBARA: The long answer is that language, like gender, is fluid. Words and meanings change with the world over time, as they come to represent different things to people. Grammar is important. It helps ensure that we communicate clearly, but sticking rigidly to convention for convention's sake defeats the purpose of language, which is to express and reflect our reality as we perceive it.

Grammatically speaking, the pronouns we use should agree with their antecedents. For example, we use the pronoun she or her to represent mother, and the pronouns he or him to represent father. These days, however, more and more people are identified as non-binary genders, and they don't feel that he or she represents their gender identity. Instead, the plural pronouns they or their have become more commonplace.

If you think about it, we already use their to refer to a singular subject in casual conversation, like this. Every audience member should have their bag checked before entering the stadium. Strictly speaking, we should say every audience member should have his or her bag checked before entering the stadium, but colloquially, many people use the plural their as a quicker way of expressing the same thing. While it is not as widespread in formal written work, using the plural pronoun would be unlikely to cause confusion.

BEN: That's a really cool way to think about language.

BARBARA: Well, language is pretty cool. And it's great that you want to respect your friend's wishes regarding their pronouns. We should always do our best to respect others identities.