

The rise of y'all

by Thomas Moore Devlin

- 1 Have y'all heard? "Y'all" is in the mainstream now. While historically associated with the southern United States, "y'all" is becoming a popular choice for people who want to address multiple people. The rise of "y'all" fills a lexical hole in English that's been around for a long time: the lack of a second-person plural pronoun.
- 2 Whether you've embraced "y'all" or prefer a different way of referring to a group of people, it's worth knowing about the history of the second-person plural in English. It combines Old English, regional dialects, African American Vernacular English (AAVE¹) and gendered language all into a single story. So yes, "y'all" really has it all.
- 3 Pronouns are a closed class of words. That means it is very, very rare for new pronouns to arise (compare that to open class words like verbs and nouns – new ones are added to our lexicon all the time). Creating a new second-person plural pronoun that everyone would use, then, is difficult. What's happened instead is that many different pronouns have appeared in various parts of the world.
- 4 The two most popular second-person plural pronouns (at least in the United States) are "y'all" and "you guys". As of right now, "you guys" is a far more popular choice than "y'all," but it's facing a reckoning at the moment. There's disagreement as to whether "you guys" is a gendered term or not. On the one hand, at this point people refer to other people as "guys" no matter the gender. On the other, "guys" explicitly originated as a term referring to men, and so it joins a pattern of terms originally meaning "men" that are now used to refer to all people.
- 5 The argument against "you guys" is still mainly made by the minority, and as far as language usage goes it can seem like a minor point. But as people make the argument for a more inclusive term, they turn to one other option: "y'all".



- 6 There are quite a few reasons for the rise of “y’all” over the past decade. As we mentioned earlier, it’s a gender-neutral option, and thus some linguists are advocating for its adoption by more people. Plus, the mainstream use of AAVE has become more and more common. Though “y’all” is not as obviously tied to AAVE as words like “woke” and “bae,” it’s certainly part of a lexicon used by African Americans that is being absorbed by a larger body of people. Social media is also a major contributor here, breaking down geographic boundaries. 11, this has allowed the word to flourish.
- 7 “Y’all” has a long way to go before becoming part of Standard English, or even Standard American English, but it’s not entirely far-fetched that it might. It’s an incredibly versatile term – it can also be used to address a single person, or you can use “all y’all” to widen the scope of who you’re talking to – and it’s more concise than most of the other second-person plural pronouns mentioned before.
- 8 If you’ve never used “y’all” before, give it a try. It might sound like you’re doing an imitation of a southerner at first, but after a while it becomes natural. We won’t tell you what to do with your life, but if y’all want to adopt a new way of addressing groups, don’t overlook “y’all.”

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noot 1 AAVE = variëteit van het Engels die gesproken wordt door veel Afro-Amerikanen in met name stedelijke gemeenschappen in de Verenigde Staten en Canada