



Pronoun Usage

A pronoun takes the place of a noun in a sentence, and the noun the pronoun replaces is the antecedent. Antecedents should be clear—pronouns must agree with antecedents in person, number, and gender. The following situations cause problems but can be corrected using the strategies shown.

Ambiguous or vague reference

Readers have difficulty when a direct reference cannot be drawn between the pronoun and antecedent.

X: The sophomores and juniors took the new test. *They* improved by 10%.

✓: The sophomores and juniors took the new test. *The juniors* improved 10%.

✓: The sophomores and juniors took the new test. *Both classes* improved 10%.

X: The patient's height, weight, blood pressure, and social security number were recorded. *This* was stored on the confidential hospital server.

✓: The patient's height, weight, blood pressure, and social security number were recorded. *This protected personal information* was stored on the confidential hospital server.

X: During the rally, protestors threw eggs at the candidate, *which* angered supporters.

✓: During the rally, protestors threw eggs at the candidate, *an action which* angered supporters.

X: Dr. Falk's surgical procedure, which includes a new type of stent, is cutting-edge; *it* is currently being used in Sweden.

✓: Dr. Falk's cutting-edge surgical procedure is currently being used in Sweden, and he has developed and new type of stent for *it*.

Gender bias and agreement errors

Gender bias problems arise when the writer uses *he*, *him*, *his*, or *himself* for an antecedent that could be male or female. Agreement errors also occur when the plural *they* or *their* refers to a singular antecedent.

X: A student reviews the catalog before *he* registers for classes.

X: A student reviews the catalog before *they* register for classes.

✓: A student reviews the catalog before *he or she* registers for classes.

✓: Students review the catalog before *they* register for classes.

✓: Before registering for classes, students should review the catalog.

Who, which and that: people, animals, and things

Most style guides reserve the relative pronoun *who* for people (or an animal with a name) and the pronouns *which* and *that* for animals and things.

- X: James is the student *that* has written the most about global warming issues.
- ✓: James is the student *who* has written the most about global warming issues.
- X: Ellen works at the shelter with dogs, *who* are my favorite animals.
- ✓: Ellen works at the shelter with dogs, *which* are my favorite animals.
- ✓: Ellen took good care of Bowser, *who* is the neighbor's Labrador puppy.

Indefinite pronouns

An indefinite pronoun represents a person or a thing, generally or indefinitely. Indefinite pronouns are usually singular (*everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, anyone, anybody, nobody*) though some are plural (*all, both, many, most several, some*). These pronouns must agree in number with their verbs, nouns, and other pronouns.

- X: Everyone brought a three-page draft for *their* partner to review.
- ✓: Everyone brought a three-page draft for his or her partner to review.
- ✓: Everyone brought a three-page draft for peer review.
- X: Someone left us note saying *they* hit our car.
- ✓: Someone told left us note that read, "I hit your car."
- X: All took pride in his work.
- ✓: All took pride in their work.

Informal use of *you* and *they*

While speaking informally, writers sometimes use the pronouns *you*, *it*, and *they* in a manner that it is too relaxed for written communication.

- X: Poll tax laws often intentionally made voting more difficult for black citizens. If *you* went to the polls and could not pay the tax, *you* could not vote.
- ✓: Poll tax laws often intentionally made voting more difficult for black citizens. If black voters went to the polls and could not pay the tax, then they could not vote.
- X: On the new SAT, *they* ask a lot of language questions.
- ✓: The new SAT has many language questions.

Pronoun number and antecedent

Pronoun number is determined by antecedent; singular pronouns refer to singular nouns, plural to plural.

- ✓: Following the storm, the agency worked hard to reunite dogs with their owners.
- ✓: June and Jared practiced their routine.

Some special situations create challenges.

- X: Each shark and each dolphin was tracked by *their* radio transmitter.
- ✓: Each shark and each dolphin was tracked by its radio transmitter.
- X: Neither the house nor the garage remained on *their* foundation following the tornado.
- ✓: Neither the house nor the garage remained on its foundation following the tornado.
- X: The soccer team or Coach Black will select the new uniforms.
- ✓: Coach Black and the soccer team want their uniforms cleaned by Friday.

Collective nouns (e.g., *jury*, *team*, *flock*) take a singular pronoun when members act as a unit and a plural pronoun when members act individually:

- ✓: The committee decided to make public its meeting summaries.
- ✓: During summer months, the committee held virtual meetings and cast their votes online.

Works Consulted

Bullock, Richard, and Francine Weinberg. *The Norton Field Guide to Writing with Handbook*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2009. Print.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The St. Martin's Handbook*. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2015. Print.