Pronoun Usage: Agreement

A pronoun must match its antecedent (the noun it refers to) in gender (when applicable) and number. This is called “pronoun agreement.”

**EXAMPLE:**

Jennifer bought her books.

In the sentence above, “Jennifer” is the antecedent. The pronoun “her” matches in gender (feminine pronoun) and in number (singular pronoun refers to one person only: Jennifer).

**EXAMPLE:**

Twelve students paid for their books.

In the sentence above, “students” is the antecedent. The plural pronoun “their” matches the plural noun “students” in number. (Gender does not apply in this case.)

The following words, known as “indefinite pronouns,” are always singular when used as antecedents:

- one
- nobody
- nothing
- each
- anyone
- anybody
- anything
- either
- everyone
- everybody
- everything
- neither
- someone
- somebody
- something

**EXAMPLE:** Everyone at the women’s conference brought her own lunch.

(Use “her” instead of “their” to match the singular antecedent, “everyone.”)

**EXAMPLE:** Either student can read his essay to the class.

(Use “his” instead of “their” to match the singular antecedent, “either.”)

When a pronoun refers to more than one word joined by “or” or “nor,” then the word closest to the pronoun determines its number.

**EXAMPLE:** Either the teacher or the tutors eat their lunches in the classroom.

The plural pronoun “their” matches the plural noun “tutors,” which is closest to the pronoun.

**EXAMPLE:** Neither the instructors nor the supervisor brings her food to the computer room.

The singular pronoun “her” matches the singular noun “supervisor,” which is closest to the pronoun.

Pronoun Usage: Point of View

“Point of view” (POV) refers to the perspective a sentence is presenting. The pronouns in the chart below indicate point of view:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First person POV:</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person POV:</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person POV:</td>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When you write, pronouns should not shift point of view unnecessarily. Be consistent in your use of first, second, or third person. For example, if you are writing in the first-person “I” perspective, do not shift...
Pronoun Usage: Agreement, Point of View, & Reference

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suddenly to the second-person “you.”

EXAMPLE: I like living in the city because you can choose from a variety of events.
In the sentence above, “I” shifts to “you” unnecessarily.

BETTER: I like living in the city because I can choose from a variety of events.

EXAMPLE: Students who work while they are going to school face special problems. For one
thing, you don’t have enough time to study.
In the sentence above, “they” shifts to “you” unnecessarily.

BETTER: Students who work while they are going to school face special
problems. For one thing, they don’t have enough time to study.

Note that most instructors will ask that you avoid second-person pronouns in your essays: you, your, yours, yourself. Instead, find an appropriate substitute for the second person. Are you talking about a student or students? Citizens? Voters? Shoppers? Patients? Employees? Applicants? Choose the appropriate word.

EXAMPLE: Going to college is expensive. You have to pay for tuition, books, and parking.

BETTER: Going to college is expensive. Students have to pay for tuition, books, and parking.

EXAMPLE: The election this fall will determine the country’s economic future; therefore, you should choose McFadden for president.

BETTER: The election this fall will determine the country’s economic future; therefore, voters should choose McFadden for president.

Pronoun Usage: Reference

A sentence may be confusing if a pronoun’s antecedent is unclear—for example, when more than one noun could possibly function as the antecedent.

UNCLEAR: Jennifer locked her suitcase in the car, and then it was stolen.

What was stolen—the suitcase or the car? In this sentence, the pronoun “it” is unclear. One way to correct the faulty pronoun reference is to replace the pronoun with a noun.

BETTER: Jennifer locked her suitcase in her car, and then her car was stolen.

UNCLEAR: Calvin told his father that he needed a haircut.
Who needed a haircut—Calvin or his father? One way to correct this sentence is to use a direct quotation.

BETTER: Calvin told his father, “Dad, you need a haircut.”

BETTER: Calvin said, “Dad, I need a haircut.”

Or just rephrase the sentence:

BETTER: Calvin told his father to get a haircut.

Scan the QR Code to view a classic cartoon about Pronouns!

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