

Pronoun Antecedent Agreement

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, gender, and person. An antecedent is the noun or pronoun that a pronoun refers to or replaces.

Agreement in Number

If the antecedent is singular, use a singular pronoun. If it is plural, use a plural pronoun.

Example: Because the university is almost 156 years old, it is historically important.

Example: The dancers in Beyoncé's stage performances practice their moves daily.

Compound Subjects – A plural pronoun is used to refer to nouns or pronouns joined by **and**.

Example: The tiny chest and dresser still have their original hardware.

A pronoun that refers to nouns or pronouns joined by **or** or **nor** should agree with the noun or pronoun nearest to it.

Example: Neither the **trainers** nor the NBA neglected its duties.

Example: Neither **the NBA** nor the trainers neglected their duties.

Collective Nouns – A collective noun such as **class, crew, team, audience, or family** may be referred to by either a singular or a plural pronoun, depending upon the meaning of the noun in the sentence.

A pronoun that refers to a collective noun should be singular if the collective noun names a group acting as a unit.

Example: The family that owns the house loaned its treasure to the library. (singular - The family is acting as a single unit)

A pronoun that refers to a collective noun should be plural if the collective noun names the members or parts of a group acting individually.

Example: The family wanted their friends to see the house. (plural - The family members are acting individually)

Agreement in Gender and Person

Generally, the **gender** of the pronoun – masculine (he, his, him), feminine (she, hers, her) or neuter (it, its) – must be the same as the gender of its antecedent. The **person** (first, second, third) of the pronoun also must agree with the person of its antecedent.

Example: You would be proud to see your work appreciated by future generations.

Example: Artists would like their creations to last for hundreds of years.

Example: An astronaut conducts his or her experiments during the flight.

If you want to maintain gender neutrality or you are referring to a person who uses plural pronouns to refer to themselves (they, theirs, them), then you should use a plural pronoun to refer to a singular person.

Example: Demi Lovato is back in the charts. They released the album “Dancing with the Devil...The Art of Starting Over” in April 2021.

Example: The doctor treated their patient in the hospital down the street.

General Rules

1. Avoid the **ambiguous reference**, which occurs when a pronoun refers to either of two antecedents.

Ambiguous: Brianna wrote to Mia while she was away at camp.

Clear: While Brianna was away, she wrote to Mia.

Clear: While Mia was away, Brianna wrote to her.

2. Avoid the **general reference**, which occurs when a pronoun refers to a general idea rather than a specific noun. The pronouns **which**, **this**, **that**, and **it** are used in a general way.

General: Even students with season tickets had to pay admission to the post-season games. We thought it wasn't fair.

Clear: Even students with season tickets had to pay admission to the post-season games. We thought the fee was unfair.

3. Avoid the **weak reference**, which occurs when a pronoun refers to an antecedent that has not been expressed.

Weak: In my Communications class, I made one.

Clear: In my Communications class, I made a video.

4. Avoid the **indefinite reference**, which occurs when a pronoun, such as they or you, refers to no particular person or thing.

Indefinite: In New York, they have a pride festival every year.

Clear: New York has a pride festival every year.

5. The words *each*, *either*, *neither*, *one*, *everyone*, *everybody*, *no one*, *nobody*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *someone*, and *somebody* are referred to by a singular pronoun – he, him, his, she, her, hers, it, its.
6. The use of a phrase after the antecedent does not change the number of the antecedent.

Example: Each of the women had removed her shoes.