

## Personal Pronouns, Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement, and Vague or Unclear Pronoun References

### PERSONAL PRONOUNS

**Personal pronouns** are pronouns that are used to refer to specific individuals or things. Personal pronouns can be singular or plural, and can refer to someone in the first, second, or third person.

First person is used when the speaker or narrator is identifying himself or herself.

Second person is used when the speaker or narrator is directly addressing another person who is present.

Third person is used when the speaker or narrator is referring to a person who is not present or to anything other than a person, e.g., a boat, a university, a theory.

First-, second-, and third-person personal pronouns can all be singular or plural. Also, all of them can be nominative (the subject of a verb), objective (the object of a verb or preposition), or possessive. Personal pronouns tend to change form as they change number and function.

|                        | Singular  | Plural                    |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> person | I, me, my, mine   | We, us, our, ours         |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> person | you, you, your, yours                                   | you, you, your, yours     |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> person | she, her, her, hers<br>he, him, his, his<br>it, it, its | they, them, their, theirs |



Most academic writing uses third-person personal pronouns exclusively and avoids first- and second-person personal pronouns.

**MORE . . .**

## PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

A personal pronoun takes the place of a noun. An **antecedent** is the word, phrase, or clause to which a pronoun refers. In all of the following examples, the **antecedent** is in bold and the *pronoun* is italicized:

- The **teacher** forgot *her* book.

In this sentence, *her* is the personal pronoun and **teacher** is the antecedent.

### CHECK FOR PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT:

A personal pronoun and its antecedent must agree in . . .

Person—first (*I, we*), second (*you*), or third (*he, she, it, they*)

Gender—masculine (*he*), feminine (*she*), or neuter (*it*)

Number—singular or plural

- **Wrong:** The **dogs** tugged on *its* leash.
- **Right:** The **dogs** tugged on *their* leashes.

Only in the second sentence does the personal pronoun (*their*) agree with the antecedent (**dogs**): both are plural.

### FOLLOW THESE PRINCIPLES TO AVOID COMMON MISTAKES:

Pair a **singular** noun (that is not collective) with a **singular** personal pronoun, and not with **they** or **their**.

**X Wrong:** The **teacher** greets *their* students.

✓ **Right:** The **teacher** greets *his or her* students.  
**Right:** The **teacher** greets *the* students.

**X Wrong:** The **business** closed *their* doors.

✓ **Right:** The **business** closed *its* doors.

Pair a **singular indefinite** noun with a **singular** personal pronoun and not with **they** or **their**.

**X Wrong:** **Each kid** has *their* own locker.

✓ **Right:** **Each kid** has *his or her* own locker.  
**Right:** **Each kid** has a locker.

Even though they appear to be singular, **collective** nouns often take **plural** pronouns.

**X Wrong:** The **staff** ate *its* lunch together.

✓ **Right:** The **staff** ate *their* lunch together.

**MORE . . .**

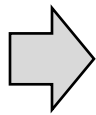
If gender is unknown, using “his or her” or “he or she” is grammatically correct, but can sound awkward.

**Strategy 1:** Make the noun plural.

- **Example**—correct but awkward: A **person** can padlock *his or her* locker.
- **Example**—correct and better: **People** can padlock *their* lockers.

**Strategy 2:** Rewrite the sentence to omit the personal pronoun.

- **Example**—correct but awkward: **Everyone** is entitled to *his or her* privacy.
- **Example**—correct and better: **Everyone** is entitled to privacy.



Although we hesitate to mention it, the pronouns *they/them/their* are becoming acceptable to refer to a singular person whose gender is unknown. **Example:** The **employee** must wash *their* hands before returning to work. (But why not just write, “**Employees** must wash *their* hands before returning to work”?)

### AVOID OTHER PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT PITFALLS:

1. When antecedents are joined by “or” or “nor,” the personal pronoun should agree with the antecedent closer to it.
    - **Example**—correct but awkward: Neither the **chicks** nor their **mother** would leave *her* nest.
    - **Example**—better: Neither the **mother** nor her **chicks** would leave *their* nest.
  2. Collective nouns are nouns that refer to groups (class, group, jury, etc.). They take singular or plural personal pronouns depending on whether they refer to the group acting together as one unit—in which case, we use the singular pronoun—or to the members of the group acting separately—when the plural pronoun is called for.
    - **Example:** The **jury** was unanimous in *its* verdict. (The jury is acting as a unit, so we treat “jury” as singular.)
    - **Example:** The **jury** disagreed in *their* assessment of the case. (The jury members are acting individually, so we treat “jury” as plural.)
- Note:** To avoid awkward-sounding plural collective nouns, place “the members of” or a similar phrase before the collective noun.
- **Example:** The **members** of the jury disagreed in *their* assessment of the case.
3. Some indefinite pronouns are always treated as plurals; others may be singular or plural depending how the pronoun is used. Four indefinite pronouns—*both, few, many, several*—are always plural and are referred to with plural personal pronouns.
    - **Example:** **Many** distrust *their* elected officials.

Other indefinite pronouns—*all, any, more, most, none, some*—may be singular or plural depending on the word to which they refer.

- **Example:** **All** of the money was counted when *it* changed hands. (“All” refers to “money,” which is singular.)

**MORE . . .**

## VAGUE PRONOUN REFERENCE

Remember: A **pronoun** is a word that **takes the place of a noun**.

A vague pronoun reference can occur in two situations:

1. A pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to a concept or word that is only implied in the sentence rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

- ✘ **Wrong:** She gave the Red Cross all her money, and *this* is the reason she declared bankruptcy. (Here, *this* refers to an implied concept that could be phrased something like “the fact that she gave the Red Cross all her money”; in other words, this concept does not appear in the sentence as a specific noun.)
- ✓ **Right:** Because she gave the Red Cross all her money, she had to declare bankruptcy. (We eliminate the vague pronoun and clarify the causal relationship between her giving away money and her declaring bankruptcy.)
- ✓ **Right:** The **donation** of all her money to the Red Cross made her famous, but *it* also bankrupted her. (We eliminate the vague pronoun by providing a clear antecedent noun, **donation**, and clarify the causal relationship between her giving away money and her declaring bankruptcy.)

2. A pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase or to a possessive noun.

- ✘ **Wrong:** In the average television drama, *it* presents a false picture of life. (Here, *it* refers to “drama,” but “drama” is the object of the prepositional phrase “in the average television drama” and therefore cannot serve as the antecedent noun for *it*.)
- ✓ **Right:** The average television drama presents a false picture of life. (The vague pronoun is eliminated.)
- ✘ **Wrong:** Othello’s jealousy brought *him* tragedy and death. (Here, *him* must refer to Othello, we think. Although this sentence implies that a person named Othello exists, the actual word “Othello” does not appear. “Othello’s” appears, but “Othello’s” is a possessive noun and is acting like an adjective, not a noun.)
- ✓ **Right:** *His* jealousy brought **Othello** tragedy and death. (Now the pronoun *his* has a clear noun, **Othello**, to serve as its antecedent, i.e., to refer to.)

## UNCLEAR PRONOUN REFERENCE

An unclear pronoun reference occurs when it is not clear which noun a pronoun refers to. In the following example, the **noun** or nouns to which that pronoun might refer are in boldface, and the *pronoun* is in italics:

- ✘ **Unclear:** To keep **birds** from eating **seeds**, soak *them* in blue food coloring. (Here, *them* is unclear because it could refer to either the birds or the seeds.)
- ✓ **Clear:** To keep birds from eating seeds, soak the **seeds** in blue food coloring. (By replacing the pronoun *them* with the noun **seeds**, we remove the need for a pronoun and make the sentence clearer.)