

Pronoun/Noun (Antecedent) Agreement

Pronouns always take the place of a noun. The noun is referred to as the antecedent of the pronoun and the pronoun must *agree with* the noun that the pronoun replaces. When we refer to agreement, we are referring to number, person, and gender. If the pronoun doesn't agree with its antecedent, the sentence may be unclear or even confusing to the reader. In the table below, note the pronoun case (subjective, objective, and possessive) the number (singular or plural) and the gender (masculine, feminine, and it).

Subjective Case	Objective Case	Possessive Case
I/we	Me/us	My/ our mine/ours
You	you	You/yours
He, she, it	Him/her/it	His/hers/its
They	them	Their/theirs
Who/whoever	Whom/whomever	whose

Pronouns must match the noun (or words functioning as a noun) that they refer to in three important conditions: number, person, and gender.

1. Pronouns must match the *number* of the noun. This means that, if the noun the pronoun refers to is plural, then the pronoun must likewise be plural. Conversely, if the noun is singular, then the pronoun must be singular.
 - Incorrect: The boys lost *their* hats.
 - Correct: The boy lost *his* hat.
 - Correct: The boys lost *their* hats. Note in this sentence the change from his to theirs and hat to hats.
 - Incorrect: John left *their* book at home.
 - Correct: John left *his* book at home.
2. Pronouns must match the *person* of the word they refer to. Unnecessary shifts between the first-person (“I,” or “we”), the second-person (“you”), and the third-person (“he,” “she,” “it,” “one,” or “they”) may confuse the reader.
 - Incorrect: When students register online, *you* always have to pay a registration fee.
 - Correct: When students register online, *they* always have to pay a registration fee.
3. Pronouns should match the *gender* of the word referred to. The gender of the pronoun can become tricky when you are referring to a generalized, generic person who may be of either sex. In this case, be careful not to offend by using a pronoun that could be considered sexist.
 - Sexist: “An applicant to the police academy who scores well on the placement exam will not have to send *his* entire file in for review.”

To avoid the implication that all police-academy applicants must be male, several alternatives may be considered.

Non-sexist alternatives:

- *Recast the sentence as plural:* Applicants to the police academy who score well on the placement exams will not have to send their entire files in for review.
- *Use “he or she” or “him and her”:* An applicant to the police academy who scores well on the placement exam will not have to send his or her entire files in for review.



- *Rewrite the sentence to eliminate the pronouns:* Scoring well on the placement exam eliminates the requirement to send in entire files for review.

While it is easy to think of number, person, and gender in simple sentences, there are special constructions that can make agreement difficult. The following information refers to some of those special considerations.

A. Compound Noun/Pronoun Agreement: Compound antecedents joined by and require plural pronouns.

- Incorrect: John and Mary left her house.
- Correct: John and Mary left their house.
- Incorrect: The students and I left my opinion at the door.
- Correct: The students and I left our opinions at the door.

B. Collective-noun/Pronoun Agreement: Collective nouns (faculty, class, team, nurses) can either be used as a single unit (collective) or they can be used as multiple parts (individual) parts of a single unit or as a group of individuals.

As a single unit, the pronoun will be singular.

- Incorrect: After every touchdown, a true Razorback fan has to stand, clap and raise *their* voice.
- Correct: After every touchdown, a true Razorback fan has to stand, clap and raise *his or her* voice.
- Incorrect: The team won because of their innovative game plan.
- Correct: The team won because of *its* innovative game plan.

If the collective-noun refers to multiple parts, you will use a plural pronoun.

- Incorrect: The team changed into its jerseys.
- Correct: The team changed into their jerseys.

C. Indefinite Noun/Pronoun Antecedent: Pronouns can cause trouble when they refer not to nouns but to other pronouns that do not refer to a specific person or thing. Such pronouns are referred to as *indefinite pronouns*. Some indefinite pronouns (such as anyone, everybody, someone, each, and nobody) take singular pronouns, and others like many are always plural. Writers using indefinite pronouns should be careful to avoid the sexist-language trap. Sexist-language refers to always using male pronouns for indefinite pronouns or using female pronouns for indefinite pronouns.

Common Indefinite Pronouns

Another	Each	Much	One
Any	Either	Neither	Other
Anybody	Everybody	Nobody	Somebody
Anyone	Everyone	No one	Someone
Anything	Everything	Nothing	Something

D. Sexist Pronoun usage occurs when an indefinite pronoun is used as the antecedent and the pronoun of choice to follow is a masculine pronoun. Writers should avoid excluding females from sentences that the reference to is indefinite.

- *Sexist:* Anyone can repair his transmission.
- *Non-Sexist:* Anyone can repair his or her transmission.



- *Note:* To avoid sexist usages, using a plural pronoun when referring back to an indefinite pronoun such as “everybody” is increasingly accepted. Thus, “Anyone can repair their transmission” may be acceptable in all but the most formal writing contexts.
 - Incorrect: One should always look both ways before he crosses the street.
 - Correct: One should always look both ways before he or she crosses the street.
- E. Ambiguous Pronoun usage: When you are constructing a sentence with more than one noun, you must make sure that your pronoun usage doesn’t create confusion as to its antecedent.
- Incorrect: The bulldog bit the greyhound, and then it turned around and bit the German shepherd.
Did the bulldog or the greyhound bite the German shepherd?
 - Correct: The bulldog bit the greyhound. The bulldog then turned around and bit the German shepherd.
 - Incorrect: They shouldn’t tell people what to do.
Who are „they?“
 - Correct: The ushers at the football game shouldn’t tell people what to do.
- F. Vague Pronoun: When you begin a sentence with *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which*, make sure that your audience will understand the antecedent of these pronouns.
- Incorrect: Take all the spoiled meat out of the refrigerator, and move it out of the house.
Move the refrigerator or the spoiled meat out of the house?
 - Correct: Take all the spoiled meat out of the refrigerator, and move the refrigerator out of the house.
 - Incorrect: The lecturer then gave a quick presentation about the 1963 model Corvette, which was very popular.
Was the presentation or the Corvette popular?
 - Correct: The lecturer then gave a quick presentation about the 1963 model Corvette. The presentation was very popular.
 - Incorrect: The English bulldog is a breed that descended from the ancient mastiff. It is a type of dog known for tenacity.
Is the bulldog or the mastiff known for tenacity?
 - Correct: The English bulldog is a breed that descended from the ancient mastiff. The mastiff is a type of dog known for its tenacity.
- G. Inappropriate use of *who*, *which*, and *that*: *Who* refers to people; *which* refers to animals or things; *that* refers to animals, things, and sometimes collective groups.
- Incorrect: The boy that dialed 911 became an instant hero.
 - Correct: The boy who dialed 911 became an instant hero.
- H. Indefinite use of *you*, *it*, and *they*: While we often refer to *it*, *they*, and *you* in conversation, in business or academic writing, you only use *you* to refer to the audience members and *it* and *they* to refer back to a clear antecedent. This will avoid confusing your audience members.
- Incorrect: Advertisers use emotional appeals to make you buy their products.
 - Correct: Advertisers use emotional appeals to make people buy their products.
 - Incorrect: In business, they want to hire people who can write.
 - Correct: Business executives want to hire good writers.

Editing Strategies: 1) Identify the pronoun and locate the antecedent. If there isn’t an antecedent, supply one. 2) If the antecedent is unclear because it is too far away from the pronoun, replace the pronoun with the antecedent. 2) *You* should only refer to your understood audience. *When choosing a pronoun, writers should keep one more consideration in mind: The pronoun should clearly refer to the noun that it replaces. If the pronoun reference is vague, then the sentence may be confusing or misunderstood.*