

This chapter will provide information on pronoun agreement and reference.

Incorrect:

Miriam was annoyed when they failed her car for a faulty turn signal.

In this case, "they" should be replaced by a specific noun, such as "the inspectors," so the reader knows who the word "they" refers to.

Correct:

Miriam was annoyed when the inspectors failed her car for a faulty turn signal.

Now it is made clear that it was the inspectors who failed the car.

Key Terms

indefinite pronouns: a word that refers to people and things that are not named or are not specific. Many indefinite pronouns (such as *one*, *nobody*, *nothing*, and *each*) take a singular verb; others, such as *both* or *few*, take plural verbs.

nouns: words that name persons, places, or things.

pronoun: words that take the place of nouns. Pronouns are shortcuts that keep you from unnecessarily repeating words in writing.

pronoun agreement: correspondence in number between the pronoun and the noun it replaces. Example: *Students enrolled in the art class must prove that they can paint.*

pronoun reference: the relationship between the pronoun and the noun in the sentence to which it refers. A sentence may be confusing if a pronoun appears to refer to more than one noun or does not appear to refer to any specific noun. Example: See above "Incorrect" and "Correct" example sentences.

Nouns name persons, places, or things. *Pronouns* are words that take the place of nouns. In fact, the word *pronoun* means “for a noun.” Pronouns are shortcuts that keep you from unnecessarily repeating words in writing. Here are some examples of pronouns:

Eddie left *his* camera on the bus.

(*His* is a pronoun that takes the place of *Eddie's*.)

Elena drank the coffee even though *it* was cold.

(*It* replaces *coffee*.)

As I turned the newspaper's damp pages, *they* disintegrated in my hands.

(*They* is a pronoun that takes the place of *pages*.)

This chapter presents rules that will help you avoid two common mistakes people make with pronouns. The rules are the following:

1. A pronoun must agree in number with the word or words it replaces.
2. A pronoun must refer clearly to the word it replaces.

Pronoun Agreement

A pronoun must agree in number with the word or words it replaces. If the word a pronoun refers to is singular, the pronoun must be singular; if that word is plural, the pronoun must be plural. (Note that the word a pronoun refers to is known as the *antecedent*.)

Marie showed me her antique wedding band.

Students enrolled in the art class must provide their own supplies.

In the first example, the pronoun *her* refers to the singular word *Marie*; in the second example, the pronoun *their* refers to the plural word *Students*.

Write the appropriate pronoun (*their*, *they*, *them*, *it*) in the blank space in each of the following sentences.

EXAMPLE

I opened the wet umbrella and put it in the bathtub to dry.

1. Kate and Omar left for the movies earlier than usual because _____ knew the theater would be packed.
2. The clothes were still damp, but I decided to fold _____ anyway.
3. Many people immigrate to America to make a better life for _____ families.

4. Paul's grandparents renewed _____ marriage vows at a huge fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration.
5. The area around San Jose, California, produces fine wines, but _____ is also the home of many high-technology companies.

Indefinite Pronouns

The following words, known as *indefinite pronouns*, are always singular.

(-one words)

one
anyone
everyone
someone

(-body words)

nobody
anybody
everybody
somebody

each
either
neither

If a pronoun in a sentence refers to one of these singular words, the pronoun should be singular.

Somebody left her shoulder bag on the back of a chair.

One of the busboys just called and said he would be an hour late.

Everyone in the club must pay his dues next week.

Each circled pronoun is singular because it refers to an indefinite pronoun.

There are two important points to remember about indefinite pronouns:

1. In the last example, if everyone in the club was a woman, the pronoun would be *her*. If the club had women and men, the pronoun would be *his* or *her*:

Everyone in the club must pay his or her dues next week.

Traditionally, writers used *his* to refer to both women and men; however, most writers now use *his* or *her* to avoid an implied gender bias. To avoid using *his* or the somewhat awkward *his or her*, a sentence can often be rewritten in the plural:

Club members must pay their dues next week.

2. In informal spoken English, *plural* pronouns are often used with the indefinite pronouns. Many people would probably not say,

Everybody has his or her own opinion about the election.

Instead, they would be likely to say,

Everybody has their own opinion about the election.

Here are other examples:

Everyone in the choir must buy their robes.

Everybody in the line has their ticket ready.

No one in the class remembered to bring their books.

In such cases, the indefinite pronouns are clearly plural in meaning, and using *them* helps people avoid the awkward *his or her*. In time, the plural pronoun may be accepted in formal speech or writing. Until then, however, you should use the grammatically correct singular form in your writing.

Underline the correct pronoun.

1. Each of the three sisters was willing to donate (her, their) inheritance to charity.
2. Everybody should bring (his or her, their) own camera to class next week.
3. Neither of the teachers had set up (his or her, their) classroom for the new school year.
4. All new skiers should expect (his or her, their) muscles to ache the next day.
5. Not one of the men had finished painting (his, their) section of the fence by the time it began to rain.

ACTIVITY 2

Pronoun Reference

A sentence may be confusing and unclear if a pronoun appears to refer to more than one word or does not refer to any specific word. Look at this sentence:

Miriam was annoyed when they failed her car for a faulty turn signal.

Who failed her car? There is no specific word that *they* refers to. Be clear:

Miriam was annoyed when the inspectors failed her car for a faulty turn signal.

Here are sentences with other faulty pronoun references. Read the explanations of why they are faulty and look carefully at how they are corrected.

FAULTY

Peter told Alan that his wife was unhappy.

(Whose wife is unhappy: Peter's or Alan's? Be clear.)

CLEAR

Peter told Alan, "My wife is unhappy."

FAULTY

Kia is really a shy person, but she keeps it hidden.

(There is no specific word that *it* refers to. It would not make sense to say, "Kia keeps shy hidden.")

Marsha attributed her success to her husband's support, which was generous. (Does *which* mean that Marsha's action was generous or that her husband's support was generous?)

CLEAR

Kia is really a shy person, but she keeps her shyness hidden.

Generously, Marsha attributed her success to her husband's support.
Or: Marsha attributed her success to her husband's generous support.

ACTIVITY 3

Working with a fellow classmate, rewrite each of the following sentences to make clear the vague pronoun reference. Add, change, or omit words as necessary.

EXAMPLE

Susan's mother wondered if she was tall enough to be a model.

Susan's mother wondered if Susan was tall enough to be a model.

1. Jim is a talkative person; sometimes he just can't control it.

2. At that fast-food restaurant, they give you free glasses with your soft drinks.

3. Sallie told Anna that she had just been promoted to assistant manager.

4. Dipping her spoon into the pot of simmering spaghetti sauce, Helen felt it slip out of her hand.

5. Pete visited the tutoring center because they can help him with his economics course.

Underline the correct word in parentheses. Then, in the space provided, write whether the issue is one of pronoun agreement or of pronoun reference.

EXAMPLE

p. agreement

My sister's major was English literature; (she, they) had to read a lot of novels.



1. Many students in English literature courses have to read the works of the Brontë sisters, who spent (her, their) lives writing poems, stories, and novels.
2. Charlotte Brontë was born in 1816 and is most famous for (her, their) novel, *Jane Eyre*.
3. Jane is an orphan who is treated poorly by her cruel aunt, oppressive teachers, and initially Mr. Rochester, but she eventually gets away from (them, her aunt and teachers) and finds love with Mr. Rochester.
4. Emily Brontë was born in 1818 and is most known for (her, their) novel, *Wuthering Heights*.
5. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff and Hindley lead cruel, revenge-filled lives, and (he, Heathcliff) eventually slips into insanity.
6. Anne Brontë was born in 1820 and is famous for (her, their) poetry and the novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.
7. Anne's novel is not as famous as her sisters' novels, but (it, she) was more progressive and controversial.
8. The main character, Helen, abandons (her, their) abusive, alcoholic husband and lives as a widow.
9. By leaving her husband, Helen breaks both the social conventions and English law of the 1800s because even if (they, women) were beaten and abused, they were not allowed to leave or divorce their husbands.
10. More than 150 years later, the Brontë sisters' books are still read by thousands of literature majors and bibliophiles everywhere because of (their, the works') timeless themes.