Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

by Sophia

1. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

A **pronoun** is a word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase, and an **antecedent** is the word that a pronoun refers to and stands in for.

These elements, then, both need to agree with each other. This is described as **pronoun-antecedent agreement**, which is agreement in number and other features of a pronoun and its antecedent.

To create clear sentences, pronouns need clear, unambiguous antecedents. The one exception to this rule is when you use indefinite pronouns, which you'll learn about later in this tutorial. When you're not using indefinite pronouns, you can end up with pronoun reference errors if the antecedent isn't clearly referenced by the pronoun, or if it's not clear which antecedent the pronoun is referencing.

Pronouns should always agree with their antecedent in number and gender. Personal pronouns, for instance, are different based on the gender of the person being described, and they are always either plural or singular.

Thus, if the pronoun is singular, so too must be the antecedent that it's referencing. Likewise, if an antecedent is plural, then the pronoun that will refer to it needs to also be plural.

Look at the following sentences.

We went into the classroom and took our seats.

Notice here that the pronoun "we" is plural; likewise, "our seats" is plural.

My dad ate his cookies.

Here, "my dad" is singular and specifically male. Thus, "his" replaces "my dad" with the singular male version of those words.

If you find pronoun-antecedent agreement errors, you'll definitely want to fix them to make sure that your readers understand your intended meaning. That's one of the things you'll often do in the editing stage of the writing process.

> 📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Pronoun
A word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase.

Antecedent
The word that a pronoun refers to and stands in for.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement
Agreement in number and other features of a pronoun and its antecedent.

2. Indefinite Pronouns

Sometimes you'll have pronouns that correctly don't refer to any specific antecedent. These pronouns replace nouns without being specific about which nouns they are standing in for. This is one way of referring broadly.

> ⤳ EXAMPLE Everyone is going to love my cookies.

"Everyone" is the indefinite pronoun because it refers broadly to a nonspecific group of people.

Even though indefinite pronouns are a special kind of pronoun, they still have to follow the rest of the rules:

- They need to be singular or plural
- They need to agree with the number of their verbs
- They need to match in number and gender any pronouns that end up referring to them

> ⤳ EXAMPLE Something about my cookies makes them delicious.

"Something" is the indefinite pronoun, and it is singular. Thus, the verb "make" is also given in the singular form.

There are times, however, when these indefinite pronouns will be mistaken as plural, even though they're actually singular. Therefore, be particularly careful with the singular indefinites, such as anyone, someone, nobody, everybody, anything, and something.

Just think about those roots—one, body, thing. Those are all singular. That helps you remember that those indefinite pronouns are also singular. If, in contrast, you need to use a plural indefinite, try something such as few, several, or both.

3. Correcting Agreement Errors

To identify and correct errors in pronoun and antecedent relationships, it can be helpful to look at them in the context of a piece of writing.

> Robots will never effectively replace teachers in the classroom. Teachers perform many functions that robots can't: they are experts in their subject matter, know how to express it in an accessible manner, be skillful at managing the classroom, and be able to connect with their students. Everything on this list are necessary for students to learn efficiently. Robots simply can't perform all these tasks. First of all, no one has emotional connections with robots because it can't respond to anybody's emotional state. While robots may be programmed to know the material, they won't necessarily be able to explain it to us clearly. And since a robot can't move like a person, they won't be able to manage the classroom. Ask anyone if they want robot teachers, and I bet they will say no!

What kinds of pronouns and pronoun errors do you see here? Start by highlighting all of the pronouns you see.

> Robots will never effectively replace teachers in the classroom. Teachers perform many functions that robots can't: **they** are experts in **their** subject matter, know how to express **it** in an accessible manner, be skillful at managing the classroom, and be able to connect with **their** students. **Everything** on this list are necessary for students to learn efficiently. Robots simply can't perform all these tasks. First of all, **no one** has emotional connections with robots because **it** can't respond to anybody's emotional state. While robots may be programmed to know the material, **they** won't necessarily be able to explain **it** to **us** clearly. And since a robot can't move like a person, **they** won't be able to manage the classroom. Ask **anyone** if **they** want robot teachers, and I bet **they** will say no!

Here, you can see a pronoun doing its job correctly:

Teachers perform many functions that robots can't: *they* are experts...

"They" is the plural personal pronoun that isn't gender specific. It's referring to "teachers," which is also plural and non-gendered.

And here, you have an indefinite pronoun that refers to a hypothetical student:

First of all, no one has emotional connections...

See how "has" is singular to match? If the pronoun itself were plural, you'd need to write "have."

Did you consider this sentence to be an error?

Ask anyone if they want robot teachers, and I bet they will say no!

If you do consider it an error, it is because **they** is usually a plural pronoun and **anyone** is singular. However, **they** can be used as a singular pronoun when the gender is unknown, nonspecific, irrelevant, or when the person referred to uses they/them pronouns.

Ask anyone if they want robot teachers, and I bet they will say no! (Gender is nonspecific, since it applies to "anyone.")

Whoever left their coat in the classroom should come and get it. (Gender is unknown and irrelevant.)

Actually, Cait says a robot teacher would be fun and interesting. (Cait uses them/they pronouns.)

> ⊘ **DID YOU KNOW**
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> Although some people object to this usage, the singular "they" has been used since the 1300s and is endorsed by all major style guides.

However, there is an error in this sentence, since "everything" is singular:

Everything on this list **are** *necessary for students to learn efficiently.*

The verb should be "is" to agree with the singular pronoun, in accordance with subject-verb agreement.

Here's one last mistake:

*First of all, no one has emotional connections with **robots** because **it** can't respond to anybody's emotional state.*

Robots is plural, so "it" should be "they."

> 🗒 **SUMMARY**
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> In this tutorial, you learned that **pronoun-antecedent agreement** is agreement in number and other features of a pronoun and its antecedent. To create clear sentences, pronouns need clear, unambiguous antecedents that agree with those pronouns. Sometimes you'll encounter **indefinite pronouns**, which don't refer to any specific antecedent in the interest of referring broadly. Even though indefinite pronouns are a special kind of pronoun, they still have to follow the rules of agreement.
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> You also practiced **correcting agreement errors** by identifying pronouns and antecedents in context and checking to see if they match in gender and number.
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> Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.

> 📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Antecedent

The word that a pronoun refers to and stands in for.

Pronoun

A word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Agreement in number and other features of a pronoun and its antecedent.