

Antecedent

Definition of Antecedent

Antecedent is an earlier clause, phrase, or word to which a pronoun, noun, or another word refers. Broadly speaking, antecedent is a literary device in which a word or pronoun in a line or sentence refers to an earlier word. For instance, “While giving treats to *children* or *friends* offer them whatever *they* like.” In this line, children and friends are antecedents, while *they* is a pronoun that refers to friends and children. It is a typical linguistic term and originates from grammar.

Often antecedents and their respective pronouns agree in number, which means if an antecedent is singular, the pronoun that replaces it will also be singular. However, sometimes writers might not follow this rule, and we see singular antecedents are replaced with plural pronouns. Likewise, antecedents and their following pronouns have the same gender.

Difference Between Antecedent and Postcedent

These terms are opposite to one another, as antecedent refers to *in front of* or *before*. It is an expression that gives meaning to a proform (a noun, pronoun, pro-adverb or pro-verb). Hence, proforms follow their respective antecedents such as “**Elizabeth** says, **she** likes coffee.” Sometimes these proforms or pronouns precede them that are called postcedents, meaning *behind* or *after* such as, “when it gets ready, I shall definitely get my cup of *tea*.”

Common Examples of Antecedent

David plays football **in the courtyard**. All the children have gathered **there**.

My uncle likes candies. **He** asks everyone to give him candies as gifts.

When **children** are happy, **they** clap to express their pleasure.

The **leaves** have turned yellow; even then **they** are on the tree.

The **bird** ate the fish quickly, and immediately *it*
A *good story* must have a quality about *it*; it must have characters, a [setting](#), narration, and dialogues.

Examples of Antecedent in Literature

Example #1: *Ode to Autumn* (By John Keats)

“And still more, later flowers for the *bees*,
Until *they* think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’er-brimmed *their* clammy cell.”

In the above lines, bees are used as antecedent, and the pronouns “they” and “their” refer to this noun used earlier. See that the antecedent and its pronouns are italicized. If we remove the pronouns, these lines will have an entirely different and confusing impression, and the meaning will change.

Example #2: *A Comedy of Errors* (By William Shakespeare)

“There’s not a *man* I meet but doth salute me
As if I were *their* well-acquainted friend
And *every one* doth call me by my name.
Some tender money to me; some invite me ...”

Here, Shakespeare uses pronouns of vague reference by employing a singular antecedent, “a man,” with the plural pronoun “their.” However, the noun *everyone* is singular, and both agree in their numbers. The [speaker](#) tries to explain he did not meet a single person, but everyone knew his name, and hence refers to everyone as “their.”

Example #3: *A Poison Tree* (By William Blake)

“... I was angry with my *foe*:
I told *it* not, my *wrath* did grow.

And I watered *it* in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned *it* with smiles ...”

This poem presents a very good example of antecedent, in which the speaker uses the noun “foe” as antecedent, and replaces it with the pronoun “it” in the very next line. Similarly, he again makes use of “wrath” as an antecedent, and replaces it with “it.”

Example #4: *Othello* (By William Shakespeare)

“Me thinks the *wind* has spoke aloud at land,
A fuller blast ne’er shook our battlements
If *it* hath ruffianed so upon the sea
What ribs of oak, when mountains melt on them ...”

In this excerpt, the antecedent is “wind,” and the pronoun “it” is its [denotation](#), replacing it in the third line. Antecedent makes these lines clear and easy to understand for the readers.

Function of Antecedent

Antecedent is a very important and useful literary device, as it makes the sense of a sentence clear to the readers. By using references such as they, their, them, it, he, and she without any antecedent subject would become confusing. Hence, antecedent makes the composition words, grammar, and the expression of the writers clear and precise, as without it, a sentence remains vague and cannot convey exact meaning. It is a tricky concept, though a worthwhile rule to grasp, because it helps writers improve their writing [style](#) too.