

CHAPTER

2 Pronouns

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Describe what a pronoun is;
2. Recognise some common problems and pitfalls in the use of pronouns;
3. Identify the various kinds of pronouns; and
4. Identify sexist language especially when using pronouns.

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter, we learned that nouns are words which connote persons, things, abstract ideas, and so on. Now let's consider the following paragraph:

John goes to a school in Kuala Lumpur. Every morning, John takes the bus from John's home. John normally arrives a little earlier in school so that John can take breakfast before John starts his lessons. John's favourite subject is English although John also likes Mathematics and Art.



Although there is really nothing wrong with the paragraph, repeating the proper noun "John" makes it sound rather strange. In English, once a noun as subject is introduced in the beginning of a paragraph, the rest of the paragraph can substitute the noun with what is called a pronoun (unless there are several subjects).

Let us now rewrite the paragraph and see if you can spot the pronouns:

John goes to a school in Kuala Lumpur. Every morning, he takes the bus from his home. He normally arrives a little earlier in school so that he can take breakfast before he starts his lessons. His favourite subject is English although he also likes Mathematics and Art.



What are the two pronouns which have replaced the noun "John" in the paragraph above?

2.1 PRONOUNS

Very simply, pronouns are words which can be used to substitute nouns. Like nouns, there are various types of pronouns. There are eight types of pronouns as shown in Figure 2.1.

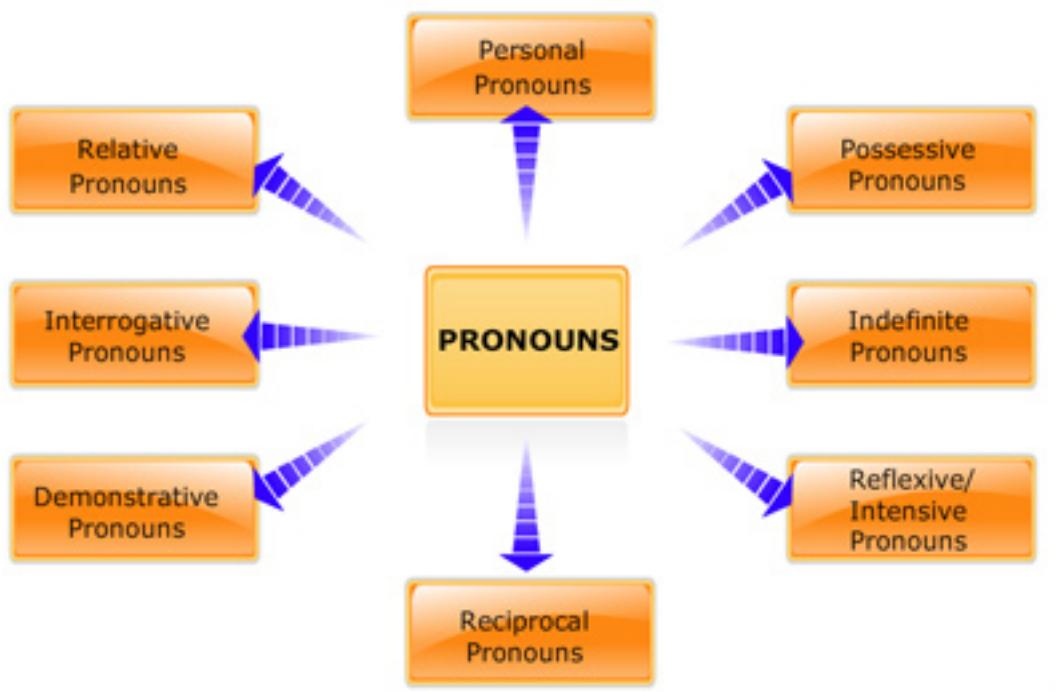


Figure 2.1: Eight types of pronouns

We will also look at some common problems and pitfalls when using pronouns such as:

- The case of multiple pronouns.
- “We” versus “Us” as appositives.
- Using pronouns as complements.
- Restrictive versus unrestrictive pronouns.
- The danger of sexist language.

2.1.1**Personal Pronouns**

We use a personal pronoun when we are talking about ourselves, the person/people we are talking to or about, and the thing we are talking about. There are many kinds of personal pronouns.

Figure 2.2 shows eight most common personal pronouns.

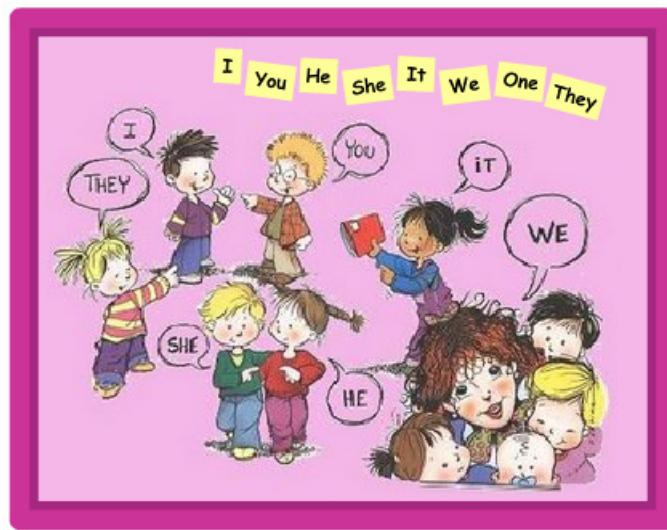


Figure 2.2: Most common personal pronouns

(a) “I”

When you are referring to yourself, “I” is always spelt with a capital letter.

Example:

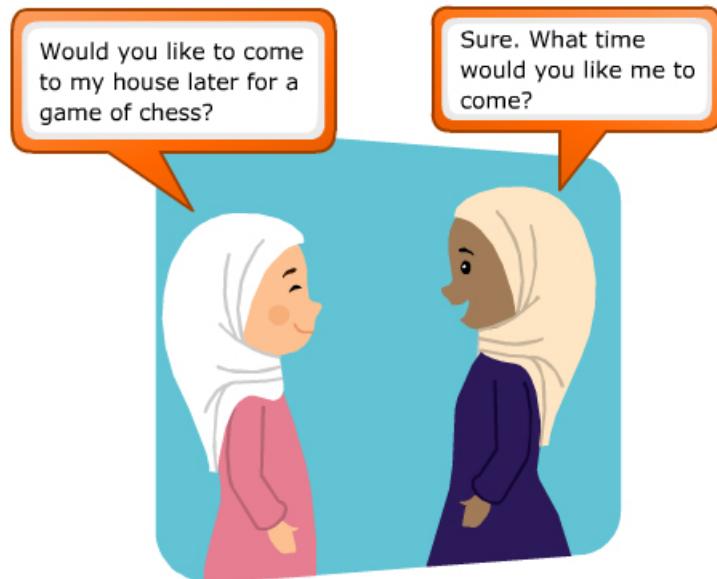
The first example shows a girl eating sushi with chopsticks. The text next to her says "I am the one who ate the sushi." The second example shows two people listening to music at a piano. The text next to the person on the left says "I like listening to jazz and classical music."

(b) You

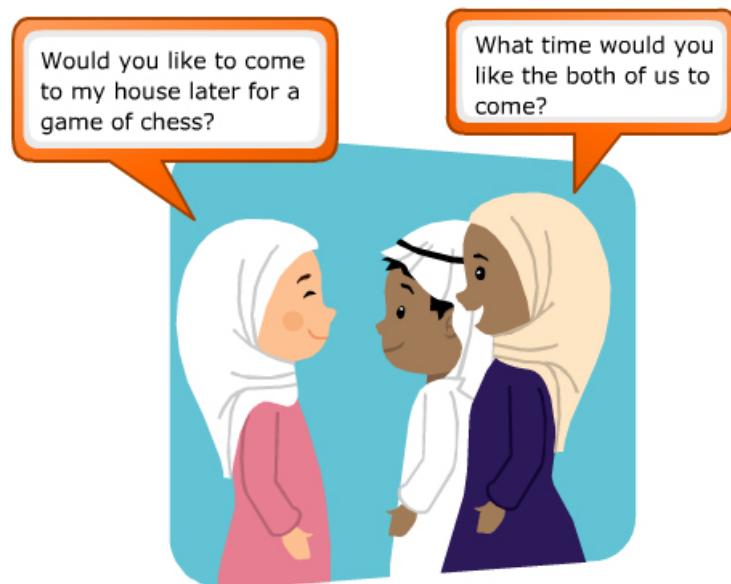
When referring to the person/persons you are talking to.

Example:

Suppose Aishah wants to invite Siti to her house for a game of chess. She would say something like this:



Suppose Aishah wants to invite both Siti and Adam to her house for chess. She would still use "you" to refer to both her friends.



(c) He (him)

When you are referring to a man or a boy.

Example:

*John goes to a school in Kuala Lumpur. **He** takes the bus to school everyday.*

He in the second sentence refers to the noun John in the first sentence.



He is the subjective pronoun. The objective pronoun is “him”.
Example: Please give **him** (not he) the pencil now.

(d) She (her)

When you are referring to a woman or a girl.

Example:

*Salena was a teacher for 30 years. **She** retired last year to concentrate on writing.*



She is the subjective pronoun. The objective pronoun is “her”.
Example: Please give **her** (not she) the pencil now.

(e) It

When you are referring to a thing, an animal, something indeterminable (like the sex of a baby) or an uncountable noun.

I have started reading the book I borrowed from the library last week.

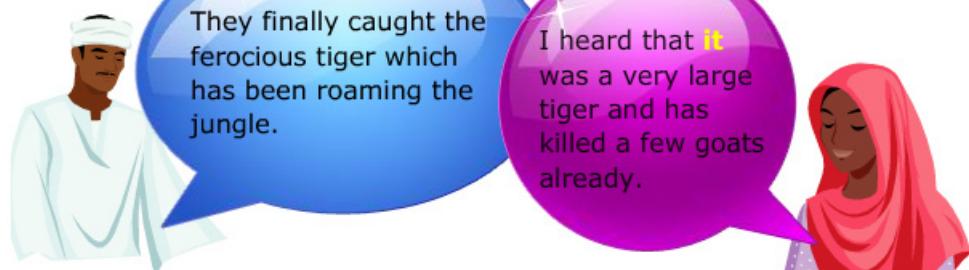


Is **it** any good?

“It” here refers to Sara’s library book.

They finally caught the ferocious tiger which has been roaming the jungle.

I heard that **it** was a very large tiger and has killed a few goats already.



“It” here refers to the tiger.

Oh! **It** is so cute!

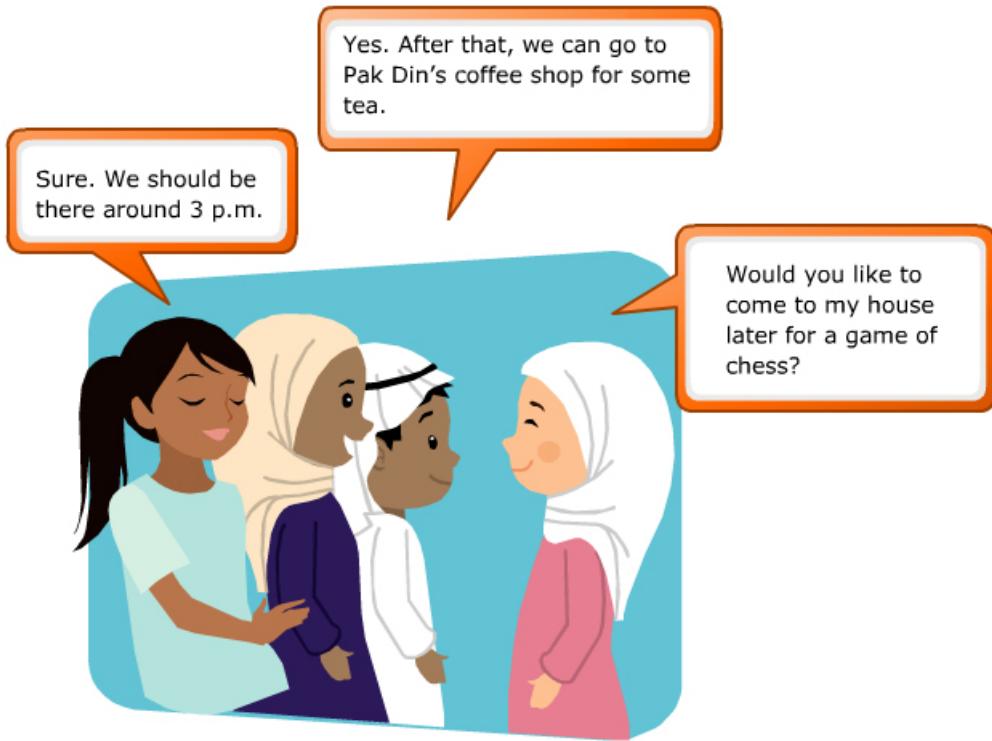
Look at that baby in the pram.



“It” here refers to the baby.

(f) We (Us)

When you are referring to yourself **and** someone else, or a group to which you belong.



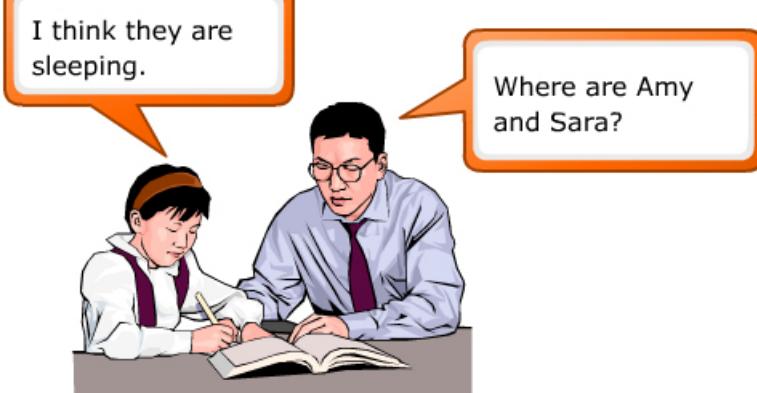
When Mariam says “we”, she is referring to herself, Siti and Adam.



The objective pronoun for “we” is “us”.

(g) They

When you are referring to a group of people, and you are not one of them.



They refers to Amy and Sara.

(h) One

This useful pronoun is used like “he” or “she” but is gender-neutral. When you want to talk about someone in general and want to remain gender-neutral, you can use this pronoun.



One has to ensure that one treats everyone fairly at all times.



One cannot help but grow old.



Sleeping too much makes **one** lazy and grumpy.



The use of “one” as pronoun is regarded by some people to be old-fashioned. Nevertheless, as you can see, it is useful especially when you want to remain gender-neutral in your writing or speech.



ACTIVITY

Change the underlined word or words to a pronoun.

1. Hamidah made dinner for the whole family.
2. Sonia sang a song with Rohanna and Swee Lin.
3. Mrs. Wong cleaned Adam's room.
4. The house needs to be cleaned and repainted before the New Year.
5. When James returned from school, James heard the dog barking loudly.
6. Larry came at 3 pm but nobody saw _____ enter the building.
7. Lee, Tan and Abdul are friends. Lee, Tan and Abdul have known each other since Lee, Tan and Abdul were boys.
8. Chan: Can Chan ask Ramli a question about tomorrow's test?
Ramli: Sure. What is the question?
9. Nirmala must go to the supermarket to buy some flour. She needs some flour to bake a cake.
10. Mrs. Tan will be here soon. Can you please pass this message to _____ when she comes?
11. Ramasamy sent Susila to the hospital yesterday because Susila had high fever.
12. Jill: Rose and Jill are going to the cinema tomorrow. Would Lucy like to come along?
Lucy: What show are Rose and Jill going to watch?
Jill: Rose and Jill are thinking of the new kung-fu movie.

Agreement of Pronouns with Antecedents

The same grammar rule applies when it comes the pronoun-verb agreement. A singular pronoun must take a singular verb (or antecedent), while a plural pronoun must take a plural antecedent.

Examples:

He **has** gone to the shop to buy some rice.



Musa **is** the only one with the correct answer.



It **comes** once every year.



They **have** gone to the shop to buy some food.



Jill and Jacky **are** thinking of watching a movie later.



Mother and Father **worry** about my little brother who is ill.

2.1.2 Possessive Pronouns

We learned in the last chapter that for many countable nouns, we show possession by adding an apostrophe and an “s” after the noun. We can also show ownership of things with a pronoun, but these pronouns take specific forms.

Possessive pronouns are used in the following ways:

- **To show ownership of something.**

Example:

This car belongs to Samuel. It is **his** car.



- **To show relationship between people, things, and events.**

Example:

This man is Miriam and Henry's father. He is **their** father.



My name is Andrew.

Her school was named “Cleanest School” last year.



Let's learn some of the most common possessive pronouns.

(a) My and Mine

If something belongs to you and you want to show that it belongs to you, you use “**my**”. “My” is used when you are talking about yourself as a subject of the sentence. You use “**mine**” when you are talking about yourself as an object of a sentence.

Example:

My bag has a ribbon on it.
That bag with a ribbon is **mine**.



(b) Your and Yours

If however, a thing belongs to your friend and you want to tell this to your friend directly, then you use “**your**” (subject; you use “**yours**” usually as object).

Example:

Your bag has a ribbon on it. That bag with a ribbon
is **yours**. OR

Yours is that bag with the ribbon.



(c) Our or Ours

When you want to talk about something belonging to you and another person or group, you use “**our**”. Remember, you must be included in this pair/group. You use “**ours**” usually as the object of a sentence.

Example:

All **our** hard work has paid off.



That money is **ours**.



(d) Their or Theirs

You use “**their**” when you want to talk about something that belongs to a pair or group to which you do not belong. You use “**theirs**” usually as the object of a sentence.

Example:

I think **their** meeting will last all afternoon.



The tree house belongs to James and Henry. It is **theirs**.

(e) His and Her

You use “**his**” (for a man or a boy) or “**her**” (for a woman or a girl) when you want to talk about something belonging to, or someone related to, another person (not a group).

Example:

Of all the students who answered the question, **her** response was the best.



His grandfather came to visit last October.

(f) Its

When you want to talk about something belonging to another thing, or plant, or animal, you use “**its**”.

Example:

The machine stopped working yesterday. **Its** fuse short-circuited.



The dog dropped **its** bone while crossing the river.



That tree sprouts **its** leaves once every year.



Because possessive pronouns already show ownership, unlike nouns, you do not need to add an apostrophe and an “s” to them. The only pronoun that would require the addition of an apostrophe and an “s” is the pronoun “one”.

Example:

One’s wealth must be carefully managed to ensure that it can last one a long time.

2.1.3**Indefinite Pronoun**

Indefinite pronouns can be singular, plural or both.

(a) Singular

Singular refers to unspecified people/thing in the singular.

Example:

another	either	much	one
anybody	everybody	neither	other
anyone	everyone	nobody	somebody
anything	everything	no one	someone
each	little	nothing	something

(b) Plural

Plural refer to unspecified people/things in the plural.

Example:

both	few	many	others	several
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(c) Singular or Plural

Singular or plural refers to one or more than one person/thing.

Example:

all	any	more	most	none	some
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We use an indefinite pronoun when we want to replace a noun but without specifying which noun. Usage of pronouns which can be singular or plural will depend on what you wish to say.

1.2

NOUN-VERB AGREEMENT

Look at the two sentences below for example:

1. **All** in the team advanced until **they** reached the finals.
2. **All** in the team advanced until **it** reached the finals.

- In the first sentence, you are referring to the different members of the team.
- In the second, you are referring to the team as a single unit.

Be careful of the verb that follows an indefinite pronoun. The same rule as the noun-verb agreement applies. If the pronoun is singular, a singular verb follows.

Example:

Everyone **has** the chance to participate in the quiz.



If the pronoun is plural, a plural verb follows:

Example:

Many **have** tried, but few **have** succeeded.



If the pronoun can be singular or plural, decide if you are considering the pronoun as representing the various elements that form the unit, or the unit as a whole.

For example:

*All the fish in the river **is** dead.*

The fish in the river as a single unit.



*All the fish in the river **are** dead.*

Each and every single fish in the river

2.1.4 Reflexive/Intensive Pronoun

A reflexive pronoun is usually used when the object of a sentence is the same as the subject. Each personal pronoun (I, you, she, etc.) has its own reflexive form.

Personal Pronoun

I
You (singular)
You (plural)
He
She
It
We
They

Reflexive Pronoun

Myself
Yourself
Yourselves
Himself
Herself
Itself
Ourselves
Themselves

Reflexive pronouns are used in the following situations:

(a) When the subject and object are the same.

Examples:

I hurt **myself**.



The team named **themselves** "The A Team".



The man accidentally shot **himself**.



(b) As the object of a preposition (see Chapter 5), referring to the subject.

Examples:

She treated **herself** to dinner.



He built the tree-house all by **himself**.

Sometimes I find that I talk to **myself**.



(c) When you want to emphasise the subject.

Examples:

Since no one will help me, I'll do it **myself**.



They finished all the food **themselves**. There is no food left!



Fill in the blanks with the correct reflexive pronouns.

1. Adrian drew this picture _____.
2. The children finished the task all by _____.
3. We helped _____ to some cakes and coffee at the pantry during teatime.
4. Arul, did you write this story all by _____? It is very good.
5. I composed this song _____. I hope to able to sing in front of a live audience one day.
6. I hurt _____ while playing football this morning. I fell and scratched my hand.
7. In the story, the lion considered _____ the bravest and strongest of the animals.
8. That strange man sitting in the corner often talks to _____.
9. John and James, please make _____ comfortable in the living room while I go get some drinks.
10. Mr. Chin, you should know _____ that this project will require a lot of money.

2.1.5

Reciprocal Pronouns

We use the reciprocal pronouns when we want to talk about two or more persons doing something together and achieving the same result at the same time.

In English there are two kinds of reciprocal pronouns:

- Each other – for two persons.
- One another – for two or more persons.

Reciprocal pronouns help us to say in one sentence what otherwise will require two sentences to say.

For example:

Instead of saying:

On Christmas day, John gave Frank a card, and Frank gave John a card.

We could just say:

*On Christmas day, John and Frank gave **each other** a card.*

In this case, both John and Frank are doing something at the same time, and both of them achieved the same result – that is, they both got a card!

If you want to talk about more than two people, we could use the reciprocal pronoun “one another”.

Example:

The employees of that company cooperate with **one another** to achieve their target.



The students congratulated **one another** on a job well done.



2.1.6 Demonstrative Pronouns

The four demonstrative pronouns are “this”, “that”, “these”, “those”. A demonstrative pronoun identifies and specifies a noun or pronoun.

(a) This, These

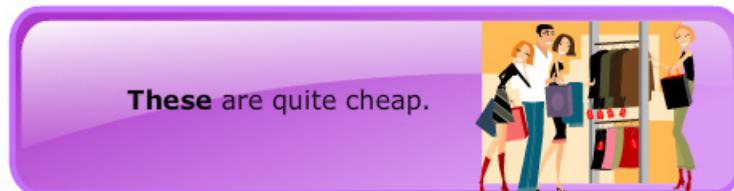
You use “this” and “these” to talk about nouns that are near to you in time or space.

Examples:

- (i) If you have just eaten a piece of cake, and the cake is still in front of you, you can say:



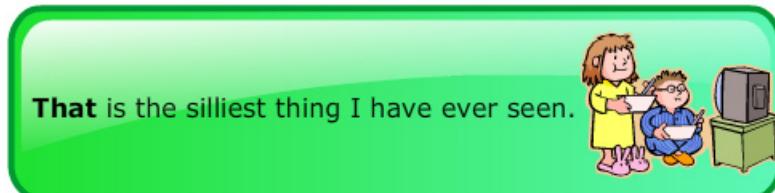
- (ii) If you are at a textile shop, and there are some discounted shirts for sale, you could say:

**(b) That, Those**

You use “that” or “those” to talk about nouns that are far away from you in time or space.

Examples:

- (i) If you saw on television a rather silly thing someone did, you could say:



- (ii) If you saw a pair of shoes on the far end of the hall that belongs to your father, you can say:



Those belong to dad.



This and **that** refer to singular nouns.

These and **those** refer to plural nouns.



Fill in the blanks of the following sentence with “this”, “that”, “these” or those”.

1. Your shoes are bought from the store. _____ are self-made.
2. _____ is the last time I am going to listen to you. From now on, I will make my own decisions.
3. I think your direction is wrong. _____, as stated in the map, seems more accurate.
4. You don't need fancy glasses to look pretty. _____ will do.
5. I can't believe you made this muffin. _____ is delicious!
6. _____ was the saddest story I have ever heard.
7. Please use the old broom to sweep the kitchen. _____ is for the living room.
8. _____ were the days when children could play in the open without fear of kidnapping.

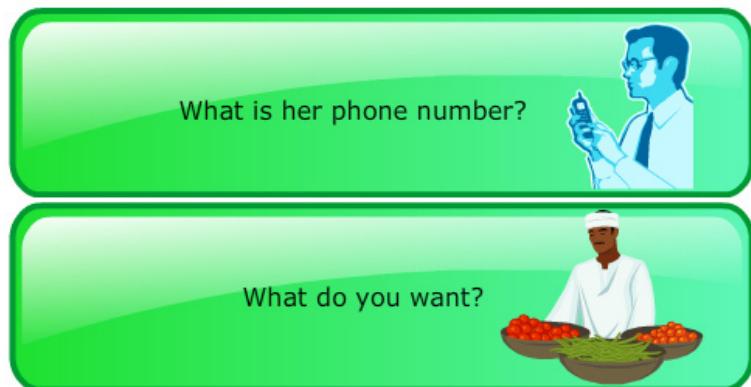
2.1.7

Interrogative Pronouns

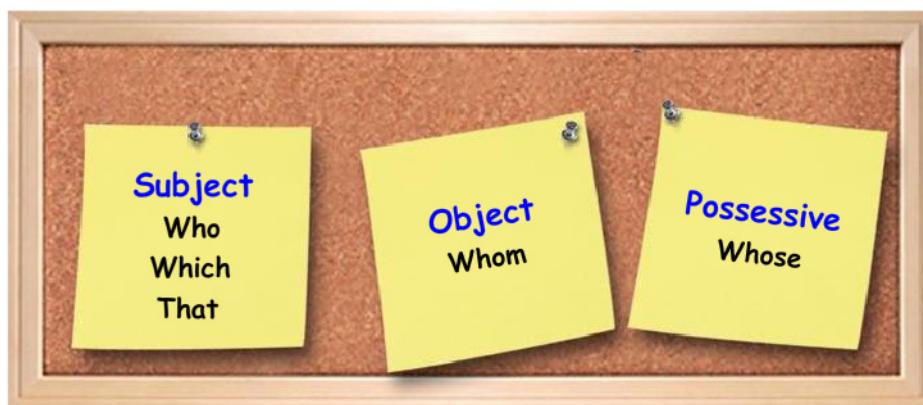
You use an interrogative pronoun to ask a question. Often, the antecedent is not known (i.e. the interrogative pronoun does not distinguish between a singular and a plural), which is why the question has to be asked.

Interrogative pronouns usually lead to questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer.

For example:



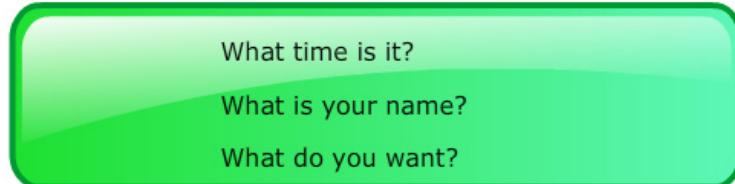
Interrogative pronouns are: What, Which, Who, Whose, Whom. These pronouns can function as a subject, an object or a possessive in a sentence.



(a) **What**

What is used to ask about objects or people.

Examples:



(b) Which

Which can be used to ask about objects or people.

Examples:

Which chair are you talking about?
Which jumper do you like?
Which is your mother?

(c) Who

Who is used for asking about people only.

Examples:

Who are you?
Who is your mother?
Who has been sitting in my chair?

(d) Whose

Whose is used to ask about a possession relationship.

Examples:

Whose book is this?
Whose car did you drive here?

(e) Whom

Whom is used to ask about people only. It is less common and more formal than “who”.

Examples:

Whom did you phone?

For whom will you vote?

2.1.8**Relative Pronouns**

“Who”, “whom”, “which”, “that” and “whose” can also be used as a relative pronoun. A relative pronoun “relates” a subordinate (or dependent) clause to the rest of the sentence (see chapter 7). It is found only in sentences with more than one clause.

The man **whom** she chose will do a wonderful job.



He is the boy **who** will grow up to be king.



That is the house which used to belong to Dr Lim.



Molly is the one whose mother won the lottery.



A car that I bought has very impressive upholstery.



2.2**COMMON PITFALLS AND GREY AREAS
IN PRONOUN USAGE**

Pronouns are perhaps one of the more difficult parts of speech in English because there are several pitfalls and grey areas when using them. Below are a few general ones. Please consider them carefully.

2.2.1**The Case of Multiple Pronouns**

It can become confusing when there are more than one pronoun involved. For example, the pronoun for a man or boy includes he, him and his.

So how do you decide which pronoun is the correct one in the following sentence:

_____ (he/his/him) and _____ (me/I) went shopping.

The best way to find out is to split the sentence into two:



_____ he/his/him) went shopping.



_____ (me/I) went shopping.

Then try out the different pronouns:



He went shopping.
His went shopping.
Him went shopping.



Me went shopping.
I went shopping.

Clearly, the constructions: “He went shopping. I went shopping” are correct. This is because both occupy the subject of the sentence, and so the subjective pronouns must be used (his is the possessive pronoun; him and me are objective pronouns).

When you combine them into a single sentence, it will read:

He and **I** went shopping.

Now try the following sentence out by yourself.

Jasmine went to the movie with she/her and I/me.

*Hint: the pronouns should be objective.



Underline the correct pronouns in the following sentences.

1. I/me will go to the restaurant with him/his/he later.
2. She/her and them/they couldn't get along at all.
3. We/Us/Our father bought we/us/our a new set of furniture for the new room.
4. They/their/them wanted to know what time is the exam tomorrow.
5. Can you please tell she/her and she/her friends to talk softly? This is the library.
6. The story affected I/me when I/me read it.
7. Daniel told both he/him/his and she/her to go ahead with the plans.
8. Mrs. Lim found they/them playing behind the kitchen table when she/her came home from work.

2.2.2 “We” versus “Us” as Appositives

An appositive is usually a noun or pronoun that follows immediately after another noun or pronoun to explain or identify it.

Look at the examples below:

He, the **team captain**, told the boys that they must practice harder.

In this sentence, the **team captain** is the appositive because it identifies “he”.

Mary, **the girl with the pony tail**, is Donna's sister.



In this sentence, **the girl with the pony tail** is the appositive because it both identifies and explains "Mary".

In the two examples given, the appositives come after the pronoun/noun. The appositives however, can also precede the noun or pronoun.

For example:

The girl with the pony tail, Mary, is Donna's sister.



Confusion often arises when using the pronouns "we" and "us" appositives. Actually, a very simple rule applies. We have learned that "we" is the subjective pronoun and "us" the objective pronoun. This same rule applies when we use them as appositives.

Example:

We children know the value of friendship.

(subjective "we" as appositive)

The value of friendship is known to **us children**.

(objective "us" as appositive)

When we use pronoun appositives we do not need to set them off with commas.

Compare these two sentences:

Mary, the girl with the pony tail, is Donna's sister.

We children know the value of friendship.

2.2.3

Pronouns as Complements

When we use a personal pronoun as a “subject complement”, that is a pronoun that comes after the verb to-be (for example, is, are, etc. see chapter 3), we usually use the subjective pronoun.

This is the formal way of using pronouns as complements.

Example: *Who is it? It is I.*

But in spoken or informal use of English, it is not wrong to use the objective pronoun as well.

Example: *Who is it? It is me.*

2.2.4

Grey Area: Relative Pronouns - That (restrictive) versus Which (non-restrictive)

Confusion often arises when it comes to deciding whether to use that or which in a sentence as the relative pronoun.

Look at the sentences below:

The tiger **that** killed the deer ran away.

The tiger, **which** killed the deer, ran away.

Both sentences are correct, but they do not mean the same thing.

When we use “that” as the relative pronoun in a sentence, we are constructing a “restrictive clause”. A restrictive clause is one that cannot be dropped without destroying the meaning of the sentence.

A non-restrictive clause, on the other hand, is a clause that adds information to the sentence, but is really not essential to the sentence. Hence, even if this clause is dropped, the sentence will still work (which is why there are commas around “which”).

So, when you are deciding between “which” or “that,” you have to ask yourself how important the information that follows is to the rest of the sentence.

Let us look at the two sentences again.

The first sentence implies that there are other tigers, but only the one that killed the deer escaped. Thus the “that” phrase is necessary to the sentence because it points out an important characteristic of the tiger that is the subject of the sentence.

The second sentence suggests that there was only one tiger, and it got away. The fact that it killed a deer is useful to know, but not essential to the sentence.

Here is another set of examples:

Please buy the balloon that is green.

Please buy the balloon, which is green.

In the first sentence, you are asked to buy only the green balloon.

In the second, you are asked to buy a balloon which just happens to be green. It could be any balloon, but it just so happens that at the moment of your purchase, it is a green balloon on sale.

2.2.5 “Who” versus “Whom”

As we have seen in 2.1.7 “whom” is less commonly used and is more formal. But there are cases in which “who” and “whom” must be clearly distinguished to ensure correct usage. In most cases, we use “who” as the subject and “whom” as the object of a sentence.

Example:

Who is that girl sitting on the swing? (subject)

The girls, three of **whom** are sisters, were playing netball yesterday. (object)

Things become a bit confusing when “who” is not clearly the subject of the sentence.

For example:

It was Tunku Abdul Rahman **who** was the first Prime Minister of Malaysia.

In this case, “who”, not “whom”, is correct because it refers to the subject of the sentence.

A simple way to ensure correctness is simply to substitute the personal pronoun “he/him” or “she/her” for “who/whom.”

If **he** or **she** would be the correct form, the proper choice is **who**. If **him** or **her** would be correct, use whom. This method of replacing a personal pronoun for the relative pronoun works well whenever you have problems deciding between **who** or **whom**.

2.2.6 Sexist Language

You should be careful in writing and speaking to avoid sexist language, especially when talking about the third person. Traditionally, users of English tend to privilege the male pronouns (he/him/his) to the point that discussions and statements often seem to ignore women altogether.

For example, you may have heard someone saying something like this before:

Anyone who wants to know **his** results should see **his** teacher.

If this sentence is said in an all-boys’ school, it would not be a problem. It would certainly be a problem, however, if it is said in a co-ed school. It was once a practice to use the male noun (man) and pronoun to imply both men and women. But in today’s politically correct world, such a practice is frowned upon. Hence, it is important to use gender-neutral language conscientiously.

In this case, the above sentence will be written like this:

Anyone who wants to know **his or her** results should see **his or her** teacher.

The construction may be a little clumsy, but it avoids the pitfall of sexist language. Alternatively, you could just use the plural pronoun:

Those who want to know **their** results should see **their** teacher.

SUMMARY

1. Pronouns can be tricky and they are one of the hardest parts of speech in English to use.
2. Their rules are many, and there are also many variations and exceptions.
3. It can sometimes be confusing, especially with regards to deciding relative pronouns to use, so it is advisable that you get yourself a good dictionary to help you.
4. Some of the most common problems with pronoun usage have been outlined and explained.

KEY TERMS

Antecedent

Pronouns

Possessive pronouns

REFERENCES

Coghill, Jeff and Stacy Magedanz. *Cliff study solver: English grammar*. New York: Wiley & Sons, 2003. (Chapter 2)