



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

PRONOUN AGREEMENT

Pronouns take the place of or refer to nouns, other pronouns, or phrases. The word that the pronoun refers to is called the *antecedent*.

- Joe* bought a *Fender* because *it* is *his* favorite guitar.
(*It* refers to the antecedent *Fender*, and *his* refers to the antecedent *Joe*)
- Sean* and *Megan* played *their* instruments.
(*Their* refers to the plural antecedent *Sean* and *Megan*)
- Playing the drums on a hot day* can be dangerous since *it* can cause heatstroke.
(*It* refers to the antecedent *playing the drums on a hot day*)

Partial List of Pronouns		
He	Me	We
Him	My	Who
His	Our	Whoever
Her	She	Whom
Hers	They	
Whomever		
I	Them	Whose
It	Their	You
Its	Us	Your

A pronoun must *agree* with its antecedent in *number* and *person*.
When *Mary* couldn't find *her* violin, *she* asked to borrow mine.
(*Mary* is the antecedent of *her* and *she*)

The three *musicians* wanted to start *their* own band.

(*Musicians* is the antecedent of *their*. Since *musicians* is plural, the pronoun referring to the musicians must also be plural)

Making pronouns agree with their antecedents is usually easy. However, there are three special circumstances that can be tricky.

1. **Indefinite Pronouns:** The following words are *singular*: anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, nobody, no one, none, one, somebody, someone. Any pronoun that refers to these must also be singular: *he, him, his, she, or her*.

Anyone can play the piano if *he* or *she* wants to.

Everybody should do *his* or *her* best to keep the room clean.

2. **Special Singular Antecedents:** The following constructions are singular: each (of), either (of), neither (of), every one (of), one (of). Any pronoun that refers to one of these must also be singular.

Neither of the two men paid for *his* ticket to the concert.

Each of the bands had *its* own unique style.

3. *Collective Nouns* represent a group of people but are usually considered *singular*. They usually take singular pronouns.

The *band* reached *its* decision to break up after a bad week.

The *school orchestra* is well known for *its* enthusiasm.

Common Collective Nouns		
Class	Faculty	Jury
College		Government
Motherhood		
Committee	Group	School
Company	Homework	Society

Exercises:

Fill in the correct pronoun and circle its antecedent. Make sure each pronoun agrees in number and person with its antecedent.

1. Everybody wants _____ career to be rewarding.
2. Each of these arguments has _____ flaws.
3. Miss Smith will be here soon, so please get _____ contract ready.
4. Nowadays, a married couple exchanges rings to symbolize _____ relationship.
5. Brandy wanted to be _____ own boss.

A pronoun must refer clearly to its antecedent. Avoid vague, repetitious, or ambiguous pronoun reference.

Vague Pronouns

At the box office, *they* said that the concert was sold out. (Problem: who is *they*?)

Revised: The cashier at the box office said... or, At the box office, I was told...

Repetitious Pronouns

In the review, it says that *Bill* is a talented guitarist. (Problem: *it* simply repeats *review*, the antecedent preceding it)

Revised: The review says that *Bill* is a talented guitarist.

Ambiguous Pronouns

Mr. Mosely told his son that *his* violin was out of tune. (Problem: *his* could refer to either Mr. Mosely or to his son)

Revised: Mr. Mosely told his son that the younger man's violin was out of tune.

Exercise:

Revise the following sentences removing vague, repetitious, or ambiguous pronouns.

1. In this review, it says that the two bands were going to become famous.

Revision: _____

_____.

2. Sandra told her friend that she shouldn't have turned down the promotion.

Revision: _____

_____.

3. In North Carolina they grow vegetables.

Revision: _____

_____.

4. Her dog finished her dinner quickly.

Revision: _____

_____.

5. In this college, they require every entering student to take a hearing test.

Revision: _____

_____.

This handout was based on the following text:

Fawcett, Susan. Evergreen: With Readings. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992.

For further references on this subject see:

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. 4th ed. New York: Bedford's/St. Martin's Press, 1999.

All of the above texts are available in The Writing Center. Revised 07/25/18