

Pronoun-Noun Agreement

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

A pronoun is a word that refers to a noun and can stand in its place. By using a pronoun, you can refer to the same person, place, thing, or idea repeatedly without using the same noun every time. For example, the following sentence becomes far less awkward when pronouns are used:

WITHOUT PRONOUNS: **Molly** thinks that **Molly** should sell **Molly's** car to **Molly's** brother.
WITH PRONOUNS: **Molly** thinks that **she** should sell **her** car to **her** brother.

Pronoun Types

Pronouns may be divided into several categories, based on how they are used:

- Demonstrative (*this, that, these, those*)
- Indefinite (*anybody, something, etc.*) (See "Pronouns as Antecedents" later in the handout.)
- Intensive or reflexive (*yourself, herself, myself*)
- Interrogative (*who? which? what?*)
- Personal (*I, you, he, she, we, they*)
- Possessive (*my, your, her, his, their*)
- Relative (*who, whom, whose, which, that*)

Selecting the Right Pronoun

Every pronoun must agree with its antecedent (the noun to which the pronoun refers or which it replaces). A pronoun agrees with its antecedent when they match in both number and gender.

Agreement in Number

A pronoun must match its antecedent in number. In other words, if the antecedent is plural, the pronoun must be plural, and if the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular.

EXAMPLE: **Freddy** wears **his** Superman outfit at least twice a week. (Since the word *Freddy* is singular, the pronoun that refers to it is also singular.)
EXAMPLE: Freddy's **parents** believe that **their** son is slightly peculiar. (Because the word *parents* is plural, the pronoun referring to it must also be plural.)

Agreement in Gender

A pronoun must match its antecedent in gender. If the antecedent is feminine, use the pronouns *she, her, and hers*, and if it is masculine, use the pronouns *he, him, and his*. Plural pronouns (*they, them, their, and theirs*) refer to plural nouns of either gender.

EXAMPLE: Freddy's **father** is embarrassed by **his** son.
However, Freddy's **mother** thinks **her** son is cute.
Freddy's **aunts** always take pictures of **their** nephew.
Freddy's **uncles** enjoy playing with **their** sister's superhero son.

Common Mistakes

Antecedents with Conjunctions

When singular antecedents are joined by *and*, use a plural pronoun to refer to them.

INCORRECT: **Jim and Sally** are proud of **his and her** new son.
CORRECT: **Jim and Sally** are proud of **their** new son.

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When antecedents are joined by *or* or *nor*, the pronoun referring to them should match the part of the antecedent that is closest to the pronoun.

EXAMPLES: Neither her sisters nor **Jeannie** will bring **her** basketball.
 Neither Jeannie nor **her sisters** will bring **their** basketball.

Pronouns as Antecedents

One of the most common mistakes in pronoun-antecedent agreement occurs when the antecedent of a pronoun is, itself, a pronoun. In such cases, as with noun-pronoun agreement, the two pronouns must agree with each other in both number and gender.

INCORRECT: Those boxes have unbroken lids, but **these** need to have **its** lids replaced.
CORRECT: Those boxes have unbroken lids, but **these** need to have **their** lids replaced.

Pronoun-antecedent agreement may be especially confusing when the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun. Indefinite pronouns refer to or replace nonspecific people, places, things, or ideas. The following indefinite pronouns are always singular. Consequently, pronouns that refer to them will always be singular as well:

anybody	either	neither	somebody
anyone	everybody	nobody	someone
each	everyone	one, no one	

INCORRECT: **Everybody** needs to bring **their** assignment to class.
CORRECT: **Everybody** needs to bring **his or her** assignment to class.

Gender

Sometimes, a singular antecedent's gender is unknown, or the antecedent refers to a group composed of both males and females. To avoid gender bias, use both the masculine and feminine pronouns.

INCORRECT: **Everyone** returned **his** books to the library.
CORRECT: **Everyone** returned **his or her** books to the library.

If using *he* or *she* or *his* or *her* sounds awkward, rework your sentences whenever possible so that the antecedents of unknown or mixed gender are plural:

Awkward: **Everyone** turned in **his or her** homework and got out **his or her** textbook.
Better: **All** of the class members turned in **their** homework and got out **their** textbooks.

Correcting Faulty Agreement

When you have identified an error in pronoun-antecedent agreement, answering the following questions will help you to correct the problem:

1. Which word is the pronoun?
2. What is its antecedent?
3. Is the antecedent plural or singular?
4. Does the pronoun match the antecedent in number?
5. What is the gender of the antecedent?
6. Does the pronoun match the antecedent's gender?