

PROBLEMS WITH PRONOUNS

Make Pronouns and Antecedents Agree (Singular vs. Plural)

The antecedent is the word to which the pronoun refers. **Make sure they match in number.**

Ex.: Either Emily or Anne lost *her* [not *their*] keys.

The following words are singular: *anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, none, no one, somebody, someone, something.*

If you use one of these words with a pronoun, make sure the pronoun is also singular.

Ex.: The professor was fair and graded everyone based on *his or her* [not *their*] level of effort.

Another option is to make both the pronoun and its antecedent plural.

Ex.: The professor was fair and graded *all* students based on *their* levels of effort.

Collective nouns

Collective nouns refer to a group: *jury, committee, audience, crowd, class, troop, family, team, couple.* If the group functions as a unit, treat the noun as singular; if the members of the group function individually, treat the noun as plural.

Ex. (singular): The Pitzer-Pomona softball *team* won *its* third game in a row.

Ex. (plural): The softball *team* decided to go out to dinner to celebrate, but *they* couldn't agree on a restaurant.

Compound antecedents

Sometimes one pronoun refers to two or more antecedents. If the antecedents are joined by "and," the pronoun should be plural.

Ex.: *Kerry* and *Amar* discussed *their* strategy for the group marketing project.

If the antecedents are joined by "or" or "not," the pronoun should agree with the nearest antecedent.

Ex.: Either *Tracy, Samantha* or *Ashley* delivered the painting supplies in *her* car.

Ex.: *He* likes to show off, but neither *Frank* nor the *Metz brothers* could solve the equation.

(Exception: If one of the antecedents is (singular) female and the other (singular) male, this rule does not apply. In that case, the best solution is to reword the sentence so that a pronoun isn't necessary.)

Make Pronoun References Clear

Ex. (incorrect): When Maria set the pitcher on the glass-topped table, *it* broke.

Problem: What broke—the table or the pitcher?

Solution: When Maria set *it* on the glass-topped table, the *pitcher* broke.

Ex. (incorrect): After braiding Ann's hair, Sue decorated *them* with ribbons.

Problem: Since the word "braids" didn't appear in the sentence, "them" doesn't refer to anything. So, replace the pronoun with a noun.

Solution: After braiding Ann's hair, Sue decorated *the braids* with ribbons.

Distinguish between Subjective and Objective Pronouns

Subjective (they do the action): *I, we, you, he/she/it, they* and *who*

Objective (they are acted upon): *me, us, you, him/her/it, them* and *whom*

I and Me

Children are often corrected when they misuse "me" (the objective case).

Ex. (incorrect): *Me* and Mike are going to the zoo.

As a result, many people tend to overcorrect by always using "I" (the subjective case).

Ex. (incorrect): Dad took Mike and *I* to the zoo.

Remember: Use "I" in the subjective case (when you are doing the action of the verb) and "me" in the objective case (when you are receiving the action of the verb).

Ex.: Claire and *I* need the books we left at your house.

Ex.: Thank you for bringing Claire and *me* the books.

We and Us

To decide whether to use "we" or "us" before a noun, read the sentence without the noun.

Ex.: *We* tenants would rather fight than move. (Take out "tenants" and it's still correct.)

Ex.: Management is shortchanging *us* workers. (Take out "workers" and it's still correct.)

She and Her, He and Him, They and Them

Ex.: McCall and *he* share the position of club president.

Ex.: I already told *them* not to bother me when I'm working.

Who and Whom

Who (or whoever) is generally the subject; whom (or whomever) is generally the object.

Ex.: *Who* accuses me of cheating?

Ex.: *Whom* did you accuse of creating that computer virus?

Exception: Use "whom" as the subject of an infinitive (a verb with "to," as in "to go").

Ex.: On the subject of healthcare, I don't know *whom to believe*.

Ex.: I wanted to find out *whom to contact* about making a donation.

Comparisons

Sentence parts, usually verbs, are often omitted in comparisons beginning with "than" or "as."

To test for the correct pronoun, mentally complete the sentence.

Ex.: My brother is three years older than *I* [am].

Ex.: We respected no other candidate as much as [we respected] *her*.

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 175-88.

M. Callaghan