PRONOUNS: Correcting Faulty Pronoun Usage

Pronoun Basics
Pronouns are words that substitute for nouns. In English, pronouns must agree with the nouns they substitute; these nouns are called antecedents. Also, when a pronoun does not clearly refer to a noun, usually because there are two or more nouns in the sentence, this is called a vague reference. Grammar checkers do not correct problems with pronouns, so you have to edit for these errors carefully with your own eyes. Here are some basic definitions and examples of different types of pronouns:

**Antecedent**
Means “what precedes” or comes before something else. In grammar, an antecedent is a word or phrase that is replaced by a substitute; the substitute is a pronoun.

**Reference**
Means that a pronoun does not clearly refer to a specific antecedent. For example, look at the following sentence: *There are many problems in our life and in our society, and there are many movies about them.* In the last part of the sentence, does “them” refer to problems or movies? The reference is vague.

**Personal Pronouns**
I, you, we, he, she, it, they

**Possessive Pronouns**
my, your, his, her, its, our, their

**Reflexive Pronouns**
myself, yourself, herself, himself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves

**Demonstrative Pronouns**
this, that, these, and those

**Relative Pronouns**
which, that, who (including whom and whose), where

**Singular Indefinite Pronouns**
another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, less, little, much, nobody, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something

**Plural Indefinite Pronouns**
both, few, fewer, many, others, several

**Indefinite Pronouns** (Singular or Plural)
all, any, more, most, none, some, such

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreements
Because pronouns refer back to a noun or takes the place of that noun, you have to use the correct pronoun so that your reader clearly understands to which noun your pronoun refers. Pronouns should agree with antecedents in two ways: number and person.

1) Agree in NUMBER
If the pronoun takes the place of a singular noun, use a singular pronoun. If a pronoun refers to a plural noun, use a plural pronoun.

Examples:
If a student parks a car on campus, he or she has to buy a parking sticker.
If students want to park on campus, they have to buy parking stickers.

Remember: for indefinite pronouns, you have to check to see which ones are singular and which are plural

*Everybody should do his or her best (not THEIR best)*
*Both were disappointed about their grades (not HIS or HER grades)*
NOTE: Many readers find the construction “his or her” wordy, so if it is possible to use a plural noun instead, so your pronoun will be “they” instead, it is wise to do so. If you do use a singular noun and the context makes the gender clear, then it is permissible to use just “his” or just “her” rather than “his or her.”

2) **Agree in PERSON**

“Person” refers to the first (I, me, we, our, etc.), second (you), or third (he, she, it, they, etc.) person. Try not to switch person in a single piece of writing, especially in the same sentence. However, it may at times be appropriate to do switch person. For example, if you are writing a research essay in the third person but want to include a personal experience as evidence, it is appropriate to switch temporarily into first person.

Examples:

- When a person comes to class, he or she should have his or her homework ready.

  NOT: When a person comes to class, you should have your homework ready.

- I should complete my homework if I want to do well in this class.

  NOT: I should complete my homework if you want to do well in this class.

**Vague Pronoun References**

A pronoun should always refer clearly and unmistakably to a particular noun (or antecedent). Do not be vague or ambiguous with your pronoun references.

Examples:

- Although the motorcycle hit the tree, it was not damaged. (The motorcycle or the tree? It isn’t clear.)
  - I don’t think they should show violence on TV. (Who are “they”?)
  - Vacation is coming soon, which is nice. (What is “nice”?—the vacation or that it is coming soon?)
  - George worked in a national forest last summer. This may be his life’s work. (What word does “this” refer to?)

  If you put this sheet in your notebook, you can refer to it. (What does “it” refer to, the sheet or notebook?)

Corrections:

- Although the motorcycle hit the tree, the motorcycle was not damaged.
- I don’t think TV shows should show violence.
- I am happy that vacation is coming soon.
- George worked in a national forest last summer. Working for the national forests department may be his life’s work.
- If you put this handout in your notebook, you can refer to the handout whenever you need to.

*There are THREE major pronoun reference errors and ways to correct them so you can avoid this error in your writing.*

**Error #1: Too Many Antecedents**

A pronoun should only have one antecedent (the noun the pronoun refers to), and that antecedent should be clear and unmistakable.

**Example A:** Take the radio out of the car and fix it. (What is “it”?—the radio or the car?)

  - What is “it”—the radio or the car? The answer is unclear. Repair this mistake by substituting a noun for a pronoun.

  Corrections: Take the radio out of the car and fix the radio.
  Take the radio out of the car and fix the car.

**Example B:** If the fans don’t buy all the peanuts, pack them away until the next game.
Most likely, “them” refers to peanuts not fans, since it is unlikely that the writer intends to pack away the fans. However, since fans could be the antecedent for “them,” the reference is not entirely clear and is therefore faulty. You can repair this error in at least two ways.

Corrections: If the fans don’t buy all the peanuts, pack the peanuts away until the next game.
Pack away the unsold peanuts and save them for the next game.

Example C: The supervisors told the workers that they could receive a bonus.

The pronoun reference is unclear: who will get the bonus—the supervisors or the workers? They could refer to either.

Corrections: The supervisors complimented the workers on receiving a bonus. (The workers get the bonus.)
The supervisors told the workers that themselves were expecting a bonus. (The supervisors get the bonus.)

Error #2: Hidden Antecedents
Faulty pronoun references can happen when the pronoun’s antecedent functions as an adjective rather than a noun. In such cases, the true antecedent is “hidden” or obscured because it has been subordinated to another noun.

Example A: The candy dish was empty, but we were tired of eating it anyway.

The reader may think the dish was being eaten because dish appears to be antecedent for the pronoun it. Obviously, people do not eat dishes. What this writer means to say is “We were tired of eating candy.” However, candy cannot be the antecedent for “it” because candy, situated in front of the noun dish, is acting as an adjective. Only nouns can be antecedents. Repair this error by substituting the appropriate noun for the pronoun it.

Corrections: The candy dish was empty, but we were tired of eating candy anyway.

Example B: Mark called Mary’s house all day, but she never answered the phone.

Obviously, she refers to Mary since a house would not be able to answer a phone. However, “Mary’s” modifies “house”—“Mary’s” is a hidden antecedent and, thus, is not clear. To repair this error, we can change the pronoun she to a noun or remove the hidden antecedent.

Corrections: Mark called Mary’s house all day, but Mary never answered the phone.
Mark called Mary all day, but she never answered the phone.
Mary never answered the phone, although Mark called her house all day.

Error #3: No Antecedent At All
A final kind of faulty pronoun reference occurs when writers use a pronoun without giving the pronoun any antecedent at all.

Example A: The witness called the television station, but they didn’t answer.

Who are “they”? Since “they” has no antecedent to which it can refer, the identity is unknown—“they” has no antecedent to which it refers. Repair this error by changing the pronoun without an antecedent into a noun or by creating an antecedent—one that is clear.

Corrections: The witness called the television station, but the reporters didn’t answer.
The witness called the television reporters, but they didn’t answer.

Example B: Although Ms. Smith was wealthy, she made poor use of it.

In this example, the pronoun “it” has no antecedent to which it can refer. The reader knows
that Ms. Smith is “wealthy,” but “it” cannot refer to “wealthy” because “wealthy” is not a noun. Correct this error by replacing the pronoun with a noun or by rephrasing the sentence so that the noun (antecedent) comes first.

Corrections: Although Ms. Smith was wealthy, she made poor use of her money. Although Ms. Smith had a lot of money, she made poor use of it.

Example C: 

It says in the paper that the law was passed.

“It,” which appears at the very beginning of the sentence, has not noun (antecedent) at all. Additionally, the construction “It says in the paper…” is unnecessarily wordy. Repair this error by writing a more direct version of “It says in the paper…” or by rephrasing the problematic part of the sentence.

Corrections: The paper says that the law was passed. According to the paper, the law was passed.

Example D: 

I did not attend the rally, which was very unpatriotic.

Sometimes, a faulty pronoun reference occurs when a pronoun is used to stand in for (refer to) a whole group of words instead of one clear noun (antecedent). In the sentence above, “which” has no single, clear antecedent; instead it refers to the entire clause “I did not attend the rally…” A pronoun must always refer to a single, clear, unmistakable noun (antecedent); thus, the reference in the sentence above is incorrect. Repair the error by replacing the pronoun “which” with a noun or by rephrasing the sentence to eliminate the pronoun.

Corrections: I did not attend the rally. My actions were very unpatriotic. By not attending the rally, I was unpatriotic. Because I did not attend the rally, I was very unpatriotic. My not attending the rally was very unpatriotic. Not attending the rally was very unpatriotic of me.

Example E: 

Megan phoned Howard yesterday to explain why she had not attended the meeting the day before. This made Howard very angry.

“This” is a problem here because its antecedent is the entire preceding sentence. The reader cannot be sure whether Howard is angry because Megan phoned, Megan phoned yesterday, or Megan had not attended the meeting the day before. Repair this error by creating a clear antecedent for “this” or by rephrasing the sentence to eliminate the pronoun.

Corrections: Megan phoned Howard yesterday to explain why she had not attended the meeting the day before. Megan’s absence made Howard very angry. Megan phoned Howard yesterday to explain why she had not attended the meeting the day before. Megan’s phone call made Howard very angry. Because Megan phoned Howard yesterday to explain why she had not attended the meeting the day before, Howard became very angry. Megan’s phone call yesterday to explain why she had not attended the meeting the day before made Howard very angry.

NOTE: Watch out whenever you use the pronouns “this” and “which”—they are often used incorrectly and create faulty pronoun references.

Works Cited