

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

The **Pronouns** “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they” are words that replace **nouns**. **Possessive pronouns** like “his,” “her,” “its,” and “their” not only replace nouns, but also signal possession.

Sarah went to see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because **she** loves horror movies.
(The pronoun “she” replaces the proper noun “Sarah.”)

After seeing the film, **Sarah** was too afraid to walk to **her** car alone.
(The possessive pronoun “her” replaces the proper noun “Sarah” and signals her ownership of the car.)

Another name for a noun that is replaced by a pronoun is “**antecedent**.” (The prefix *ante-* means “before,” indicating that the antecedent comes before the pronoun.)

Pronouns and their **antecedents** must agree in number; for example: “**Someone** would go see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because **they** love horror movies” is incorrect because the antecedent “someone” is singular, while the pronoun “they” is plural. In order to replace “someone,” we need a singular pronoun, “he” or “she.”

Traps To Watch For

Pronoun-antecedent agreement becomes complicated when you are dealing with **generic nouns**, **compound antecedents**, **indefinite pronouns**, and **collective nouns**.

Generic Nouns: Generic nouns like “swimmer,” “student,” or “politician” refer to a non-specific person within the category of “swimmers,” “students,” and “politicians.” This non-specific person is always singular, since he or she is only one member of the group.

Every **zombie** must consume human flesh if ~~they~~ **he or she** wants to live.

Each **student** should remember to take ~~their~~ **his or her** garlic and sharpened stake on the camping trip.

Compound Antecedents: Compound Antecedents can be joined with “and” or “or/nor.” If they are joined with “and,” they should be treated as plural.

Jason Vorhees and **Freddy Krueger** teamed up to take revenge on ~~his~~ **their** foes.

If, on the other hand, they are joined by “or/nor,” they should be treated as singular.

Either **Jason Vorhees** or **Freddy Krueger** could have succeeded if **he** had not underestimated the teenagers.

Note: If the two nouns joined by “or/nor” are different in number, the pronoun should agree with the antecedent closest to it.

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Neither **Godzilla** nor **the aliens** could escape **their** fate. (Notice that “their” agrees with “aliens” because “aliens” immediately precedes the pronoun.)

Indefinite Pronouns: Indefinite pronouns like “everyone,” “anything,” “anybody,” or “somebody” do not refer to any specific person or thing, so writers treat them as singular.

Everyone who sees *The Exorcist* is frightened out of ~~their~~ **his or her** mind.

Collective Nouns: Collective nouns like “committee,” “senate,” or “audience” refer to a group that might act as a single unit. When such a group is acting as a single unit it is referred to in the singular.

The **audience** screamed in unison as **it** saw the zombie hordes approaching.

However, when the members of the group act individually, it is appropriate to refer to them in the plural.

The **audience** clapped **their** hands when Bruce Willis shot the zombies to pieces.

Practice Exercise

Underline the **antecedent** in the following examples and circle the correct **pronoun** for that antecedent.

1. The rabid vampires and hungry werewolf made its/their escape from the hunters.
2. If Hanna or Jane had seen that film she/they would have been terrified.
3. Neither the repentant assassin nor the aliens found its/their way out of the collapsing building.
4. Anybody could use his or her/their holy relic to repel the swarm of undead.
5. Every swimmer at Camp Crystal Lake lost his or her/their life because of Jason Voorhees.
6. When the army got to Washington D.C, it/they enacted a quarantine to prevent the virus from spreading further.
7. The class was armed with sporting goods and firearms it/they had stolen from various stores in the mall.

Where in *The Bedford Handbook*?

Section 22: Make Pronouns and Antecedents Agree