

PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

A pronoun is usually used as a substitute for a previously stated noun called the antecedent.

I could tell Jack was mad because he punched a hole in my front door.
(He is a pronoun substituting for the noun Jack.)

Pronouns are used when the writer wants to avoid awkward or repetitious use of nouns.

awkward I could tell Jack was mad because Jack punched a hole in my front door. I had borrowed Jack's car without Jack's permission and dented the car's front fender. The fact that Jack had just repaired the front fender from the last time I dented the front fender seemed to add fuel to Jack's anger.

better I could tell Jack was mad because he punched a hole in my front door. I had borrowed his car without his permission and dented the front fender. The fact that Jack had just repaired it from the last time I dented it seemed to add fuel to his anger.

Sometimes, the agreement between the pronoun and the antecedent it is substituting for can be confused. The result is a sentence that lacks clarity.

Although the politician makes many promises, ^{he} ~~they~~ rarely ^{keeps} ~~keep~~ those promises.

Not only the pronoun you are using to stand for the antecedent, but the verb, too, needs to be in agreement with the antecedent.

politician--he/she rarely keeps promises
politicians--they rarely keep promises

MAKE
CORRECTIONS

- The problems are serious, but it can be solved.
- The value a person receives for their dollar these days is going down rapidly.

Remember not to let intervening words or phrases confuse you.

RULES TO REMEMBER:

1. Use a singular pronoun in referring to a singular antecedent. Use a plural pronoun in referring to a plural antecedent.

The small girl put her spaceship back in the toybox.

The singular pronoun her refers to the singular antecedent girl.

The drivers lost their way because they didn't bring a map with them.

The plural pronouns their, they, and them refer to the plural antecedent drivers.

2. a. In formal writing use a singular pronoun to refer to antecedents such as person, man, woman, one, any, anyone, someone, somebody, each, every, everyone, everybody, either, neither, none.

Anyone can submit his/her poem to the literary magazine.

Each of you in Mr. Anderson's science class should turn in his/her project.

- b. If the sentence is awkward using the singular pronoun, rewrite the sentence to reflect plural usage.

Awkward Almost everyone was rooting for the lead horse, but his hopes were dashed before the horses reached the first turn.

Revised All the people were rooting for the lead horse, but their hopes were dashed before the horses reached the first turn.

- c. Informal English frequently uses a plural pronoun to refer to antecedents such as any, every (and their compounds), and each, someone, somebody, neither, either, especially when a plural meaning is suggested. INFORMAL ENGLISH IS NOT ALLOWED IN ACADEMIC WRITING.

Formal Everybody held his breath during the fireworks.

Informal Everybody held their breath during the fireworks.

Formal The instructor said that each of us should bring his/her own supply of paper.

Informal The instructor said that each of us should bring our own supply of paper.

- d. Historically, he, him, or his has been used to refer to such antecedents as one, none, everybody, and similar indefinite pronouns that could be female or male. Today, it is acceptable and preferable to use he or she, him or her, and his or her when the reference is general.

Generic he A careful writer will revise his sentences.

Revised A careful writer will revise his or her sentences.

To avoid overuse of his/her, reword the sentence or use a plural antecedent and pronoun.

Revised Careful writers revise their sentences.

3. With a collective noun as an antecedent (collective nouns: herd, crowd, people, class, team, army, etc.),
- use a singular pronoun if you are considering the group as a single unit.
 - use a plural pronoun if you are considering the individual members of the group separately.

The band raised their instruments at the conductor's signal.

In the above example, is band being considered as a unit or as individual members?

The instructor was pleased to note the class was at its best.

In the second example, is class being considered as a unit or as individual members?

4. a. If two or more antecedents are joined by and, use a plural pronoun to refer to them.

Melissa and Ashley came to collect their prize.

- b. If two or more singular antecedents are joined by or or nor, use a singular pronoun to refer to them.

I doubt whether John or David will finish his assignment before the bell rings.

- c. If one of two antecedents joined by or or nor is singular and one plural, make the pronoun agree with the nearest antecedent.

Neither the band members nor the band leader wants to wear his/her new uniform.

Although the sentence is grammatically correct, placing the singular antecedent last makes the sentence unclear. Placing the plural antecedent last allows for a plural pronoun and eliminates any confusion.

Neither the band leader nor the band members want to wear their new uniforms.

5. The relative pronoun who can be singular or plural. Who must agree in number with its simple predicate (verb) and the pronoun that refers to who.

Ms. Fine is one of the volunteers ^{pl. verb} who have been generous with ^{pl. pronoun} their time.

(Of the volunteers who have been generous with their time, Ms. Fine is one.)

Ms. Fine is the only one of the volunteers ^{sing. verb} who has been generous with ^{sing. pronoun} her time.

(Of the volunteers, only one, Ms. Fine, has been generous with her time.)

Ms. Fine is a volunteer ^{sing. verb} who has been generous with ^{sing. pronoun} her time.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

Faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement is a problem in each of the following sentences. Identify the pronouns and their antecedents; then make any corrections that are needed to bring about agreement and clarity.

1. The questions that are most often asked today concern our basic lifestyles, and the faculty does not seem to be answering it.
2. One of the men could not find their shoe.
3. Sometimes a driver suffers from blurred vision. These defects are often the result of too much drinking.
4. If a lecturer has spent a lot of time on preparation and research, they usually feel much more confident about their task and give a better account of themselves.
5. Generally, a person likes to vary their diet.
6. The attacks in June and July were much more severe than that in September and January.
7. Only a freshman or a sophomore is entitled to cast their vote at the meeting.
8. Either the watchman or the policeman must stay on the phone to keep in contact with their headquarters.
9. Neither the city nor the suburbs are capable of handling its problems.
10. I saw the future by looking at the sun and the moon, which told me its special secrets of day and night.
11. The new jazz trio at Elm Street is playing their own music.
12. Because of the storm, the fleet of shrimp boats were forced to run for the nearest harbor, where they found safety.
13. A person should be willing to defend their own principles.
14. Every American should be free to live wherever they can afford.
15. Everybody has their own solution to the energy crisis.
16. No child appreciates their parents until later in life.
17. Each of the birds had built their nest in a different part of the cage.
18. None of the soldiers kept his gas mask, for they knew they would not need them.
19. The militia increased its watchfulness, but they didn't catch the spies.

20. The citizens' group submitted their report to the mayor.

Writing Center