

Proofreading Skills Tutorial:

Tutorial #5: Pronoun Agreement

Checking for Agreement in Number

Checking for Agreement with Indefinite Pronoun Antecedents

Checking for Agreement in Person

Avoiding Gender Bias in Pronoun Agreement

Checking for a Clear Antecedent

Writing Center

English 800 Center

All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you should bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

Pronoun Agreement

This tutorial will demonstrate strategies for:

1. **checking for agreement in number**
2. **checking for agreement with indefinite pronoun antecedents**
3. **checking for agreement in person**
4. **avoiding gender bias in pronoun agreement**
5. **checking for a clear antecedent.**

As you do this tutorial and learn about pronoun agreement, try to think about the kinds of pronoun agreement errors that your classroom instructor may have pointed out in your writing. If you know what types of errors to look for in your own essays, you will be able to proofread more effectively.

Part One: Checking for Pronoun Agreement in Number

Consider the following paragraphs:

Paragraph #1

As Ivana and Norman worked that day, side by side in Norman's office, Ivana told Norman about Ivana's trip to Lake Tahoe where Ivana had deposited several quarters into a slot machine. With the last of the quarters, Ivana had won a big jackpot on the last day of Ivana's vacation. Norman wondered if Norman could repeat Ivana's success by also winning at the slot machines.

Paragraph #2

As they worked that day, side by side in his office, Ivana told Norman about her trip to Lake Tahoe where she had deposited several quarters. With the last of them, Ivana had won a big jackpot on the last day of her vacation. Norman wondered if he could repeat her success by also winning at the slot machines.

How are Paragraph #1 and Paragraph #2 different?

Both paragraphs present the same information clearly, but as you may have noticed, Paragraph #1 seems more boring, annoying, and wordy than Paragraph #2 because there is more repetition than there is in the second paragraph. Since Paragraph #2 uses pronouns, it is more concise and less repetitive than the first paragraph.

In Paragraph #2, the writer has used the pronouns *they*, *her*, *she* and *he*. Most often, pronouns take the place of nouns or noun phrases. Pronouns either precede or follow their **antecedents**, specific nouns that the pronouns represent or refer to.

Review Paragraph #2 in the following chart carefully, so you can see how pronouns and their antecedents should agree. In Paragraph #2, each pronoun has been bracketed, and the antecedents have been underlined.

Paragraph #2

As [they] worked that day, side by side in [his] office, Ivana told Norman about [her] trip to Lake Tahoe where [she] had deposited several quarters. With the last of [them], Ivana had won a big jackpot on the last day of [her] vacation. Norman wondered if [he] could repeat [her] success by also winning at the slot machines.

Paragraph #2: Pronouns and Their Antecedents	
Pronoun	Antecedent
<i>they</i>	Ivana and Norman (Notice that <i>they</i> <u>precedes</u> its antecedents.)
<i>his</i>	Norman (Notice that <i>his</i> <u>precedes</u> its antecedent.)
<i>her</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>her</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>she</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>she</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>them</i>	quarters (Notice that <i>them</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>her</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>her</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>he</i>	Norman (Notice that <i>he</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>her</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>her</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)

As you can see in the chart above, when there is more than one antecedent or a plural antecedent, the pronoun is also plural (Ivana and Norman/*they*, quarters/*them*). And when the antecedent is singular, the pronoun is also singular (*her*/Ivana, *she*/Ivana, *his*/Norman, and *he*/Norman). This is called **pronoun agreement**. Sometimes writers make errors in pronoun agreement when they forget to make a pronoun agree with its antecedent.

Below is a chart that lists all the singular third-person pronouns and all the plural, third-person pronouns. When you proofread for correct pronoun agreement, it may be helpful to refer to this chart.

Singular, Third-Person Pronouns	Plural, Third-Person Pronouns
<i>she</i>	<i>they</i>
<i>her</i>	<i>them</i>
<i>he</i>	<i>their</i>
<i>him</i>	
<i>his</i>	
<i>it</i>	
<i>its</i>	

Principle I. Pronouns and their antecedents must agree in number.

Be sure to use a **singular pronoun** if the pronoun takes the place of a singular noun, that is, if the pronoun has a **singular antecedent**, as shown in the following sentence:

singular noun

During the party, the cat licked [its] paws and smoothed [its] fur.

In the sentence above, the singular pronoun, *its*, has the singular antecedent, “cat.” The pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent.

Be sure to use a **plural pronoun** if the pronoun takes the place of a plural noun, that is, if the pronoun has a **plural antecedent**:

plural noun

During the final exam, the students wrote [their] essays quickly.

In the sentence above, the plural pronoun, [their] has a plural antecedent, “students.” The pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent.

Students often make errors in pronoun agreement when they use plural third-person pronouns for singular antecedents, as shown below:

singular noun

plural pronoun

A student may not understand [their] homework.

Using Principle I, you can correct this sentence:

singular noun

singular pronouns

A student may not understand [his or her] homework.

In this corrected version, you can see that the singular pronouns, [his or her] have the singular antecedent, “a student.” The pronouns now agree in number with their antecedent. Please note that [his or her] is used because this sentence is referring to students in general and students can be either female or male.

Exercise 1

Instructions: In the following sentences, put brackets around each pronoun and underline its antecedent. Then, using Principle I, correct any pronouns that do not agree in number with their antecedents. Remember that pronouns can come *before* or *after* their antecedents. The first one has been done for you.

1. My children are happy when [their] grandmother gives [~~it~~] brownies .
OK *them*

(“Children” is the antecedent for the pronouns [their] and [it]. “Children” is plural. Since the pronoun, [their] is plural, that pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent. Therefore, the first pronoun, [their] is correct. However, the second pronoun, [it] is singular. It does not agree with its plural antecedent, “children.” You must change [it] to [them] so that the second pronoun matches its antecedent.)

2. Even though Einstein carefully explained his theories, some readers are still confused by it.
3. A writer often depends on their childhood memories when creating characters for a novel.
4. A student attending Mills College, an all-women's college, should have no fears about their future.
5. When their stock fell below ten dollars, the dot-com company filed for bankruptcy.
6. A person left their car in our driveway last night.

Part Two: Checking for Agreement with Indefinite Pronoun Antecedents

Sometimes, a pronoun’s antecedent is not a noun, but a special kind of pronoun called an **indefinite pronoun**. Following is a chart that lists the indefinite pronouns.

Indefinite Pronouns		
everybody	somebody	one
nobody	anyone	either
everyone	anybody	neither
no one	another	
someone	each	

One of the most common pronoun agreement errors occurs when the antecedent is an **indefinite pronoun** such as *each* or *anyone*, as shown in the following sentences:

Incorrect: Each of the women in the Garcia family has [their] own car.

Correct: Each of the women in the Garcia family has [her] own car.

Incorrect: Anyone who wants to attend the next concert must buy [their] ticket now.

Correct: Anyone who wants to attend the next concert must buy [his or her] ticket now.

Even though indefinite pronouns refer to more than one person, they are considered grammatically singular antecedents and require singular pronouns, as shown above (*her/each*, *his* or *her/anyone*).

Principle II: When an indefinite pronoun is the antecedent, you should always use a singular pronoun.

Exercise 2

Instructions: In the following sentences, put brackets around each pronoun and underline its antecedent. Then, using Principle II, correct any pronouns that do not agree in number with their antecedents. The first one has been done for you.

1. Each of my brothers needs to pay [~~their~~
his] tuition by the beginning of August.

(“Each” is the indefinite-pronoun antecedent for the plural pronoun [their]. According to Principle II, singular pronouns should be used for antecedents that are indefinite pronouns. Therefore, the plural pronoun [their] should be changed to the singular pronoun [his].)

2. Neither of the Bush daughters is attending their father’s alma mater, Yale University.
3. Each of the fans cheered as they watched the Giants run onto the field.
4. Don was furious that someone left their car in our driveway last night.
5. Everybody needs adequate time to reflect on their life.

Part Three: Checking for Agreement in Person

Pronouns can be divided into groups:

	Singular	Plural
First person	I, me, my	we, us, our
Second person	you, your	you, your
Third person	she, her, hers (feminine.) he, him, his (masculine) one it/its (neutral)	they/them/their

If you are writing in the first person (I), it is important not to confuse your reader by switching to the second person (*you*) or third person (*he, she, they, it*). Similarly, if you are using the second person, don't switch to first or third person.

Incorrect: Every **student** must pull all-nighters regularly if [**you**] want to excel in college.

Since “student” and “you” don't refer to the same “person,” readers can become confused. Below are three corrected versions of the same sentence:

Correct: **You** must pull all-nighters regularly if [**you**] want to excel in college.

or

Every **student** must pull all-nighters regularly if [**he or she**] wants to excel in college.

or

Students must pull all-nighters regularly if [**they**] want to excel in college.

Principle III. A pronoun should agree in person with its antecedent.

Exercise 3

Instructions: In the following sentences, there are errors in pronoun agreement. Using Principle III, correct any pronouns that do not agree in person with their antecedents. The first one has been done for you.

1. I enjoy reading because it is an entertaining way for [you] to spend [your] time.

me

my
2. Professor Crawford told us that we don't have to write the last essay unless you want to improve your final grade.
3. When you go to Costco, one should have a shopping list.
4. If adolescents are going to smoke marijuana, he or she should be prepared to face the possible consequences.
5. When students procrastinate writing essays for English class, they risk getting a low grade on it.
6. I like horror movies like *The Omen* because it keeps you in suspense while you are watching it.

Part Four: Avoiding Gender Bias in Pronoun Agreement

Consider the following sentence:

Incorrect: When a doctor is with [his] patient, [he] must try to make [his] patients feel comfortable.

Because there is no singular, non-gender specific pronoun in English, in the past, writers used to write sentences like the previous one. However, people, now know that the automatic use of [he] is not accurate because it excludes women. As you can see, the pronouns [he] and [his] in the previous sentence suggest that all doctors are men when, in fact, many doctors are women. Not only is this inaccurate, but it is also sexist. Automatically using the masculine pronouns creates gender bias.

- One solution to avoid gender bias is to use **both** the masculine and feminine singular pronouns:

Correct (Option 1): When a doctor is with [**his or her**] patients, [**he or she**] must try to make [**his or her**] patient feel comfortable.

But this option can become too awkward and wordy, especially if it is used too often in a short piece of writing.

- Another option, if it makes sense in the context of your writing, is to make the **noun antecedent plural** and make the plural pronoun agree with it.

Correct (Option 2): When **doctors** are with [their] patients, [**they**] must try to make [**their**] patients feel comfortable.

- A third option is to **avoid overusing pronouns** whenever possible:

Correct (Option 3): When **doctors** are working, it is important to try to make patients feel comfortable.

It is very important to note that a pronoun can also convey gender bias against men, as shown in the following sentence:

Incorrect: When a nurse is with [her] patient, [she] must try to make [her] patients feel comfortable.

Correct (Option 1): When a **nurse** is with **[his or her]** patients, **[he or she]** must try to make **[his or her]** patient feel comfortable.

Correct (Option 2): When **nurses** are with [their] patients, **[they]** must try to make **[their]** patients feel comfortable.

Correct (Option 3): When **nurses** are working, it is important to try to make patients feel comfortable.

Principle IV. Whenever necessary, avoid gender bias by using both masculine and feminine singular pronouns with a singular antecedent; by using an antecedent and plural pronouns; or by eliminating pronouns, if possible.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Using Principle IV, correct any gender bias in the following sentences. The first one has been done for you.

1. ~~When a nursing student works full time, [she] often falls behind in [her] classes.~~

When a nursing student works full time, it is easy to fall behind in classes.

2. A writer should always remember his audience and explain things clearly and logically.
3. A human being will often seek meaning by trying to understand why certain events in his life have occurred.
4. When a babysitter arrives, she should be open and friendly with the children that she will be supervising during their parents' absence.

Part Five: Checking for a Clear Antecedent

Besides agreeing in number and person with its antecedent, a pronoun must refer clearly to a **specific noun** so that it is not vague or ambiguous. Consider the following sentence:

Even though the Lexus hit the fire hydrant, [it] was not damaged.

In this sentence, we do not know if [it] refers to the Lexus or the fire hydrant. That is, the antecedent is ambiguous. The writer can make the antecedent clear by correcting the sentence in one of the following ways:

Correct: Even though the Lexus hit the fire hydrant, the car was not damaged.

Correct: Even though the Lexus hit the fire hydrant, the hydrant was not damaged.

Here is a second example of an unclear antecedent:

Yuki told her professor that [she] had made an error in class.

In this sentence, we do not know if [she] refers to Yuki or the professor. Once again, the antecedent is unclear. The writer can correct the sentence by using quotation marks that identify the words that Yuki is saying. This can be done in one of the following ways:

Correct: Yuki told her professor, “[I] made an error in your class.”

Correct: Yuki told her professor, “[You] made an error in your class.”

The next sentence provides yet another example of an unclear antecedent:

Conservative adults don’t think that [they] should play obscene rap lyrics on the radio.

In this sentence, we do not know to whom “they” refers. There is no possible antecedent in this sentence. The sentence can be corrected in the following ways:

Correct: Conservative adults don’t think disc jockeys should play obscene rap lyrics on the radio.

Correct: Conservative adults don’t think hip-hop stations should play obscene rap lyrics on the radio.

Principle V. A pronoun must clearly refer to a specific antecedent. If there is no clear antecedent, you should replace the pronoun with a noun or rewrite the sentence so that the pronoun has only one possible antecedent.

Exercise 5

Instructions: In the following sentences, make sure there is a clear antecedent for each pronoun. Using Principle V, replace the pronoun with a noun or rewrite the sentence so that the pronoun has only one possible antecedent. The first two have been done for you.

1. The teacher told her student that [she] could help [her].
The teacher told her student, "I can help you."

(In this sentence, it was unclear whether [she] and [her] referred to the teacher or the student. With the revision, it is now clear that [she] and [her] refer to the teacher.)

2. ~~They~~ always say that hard work is the key to success.
People

(In this sentence, there was no antecedent. By replacing the pronoun with a noun, it is now clear who says that hard work is the key to success.)

3. Darren called his friend Hong while he was at the club on Valencia.
4. Jane told Sofia that she had passed English 100.
5. They shouldn't charge so much for gas in this country.
6. American psychologist John B. Watson recommended in the early 1900's that psychologists study human behavior and emotions. Before that, it had focused on human mental experience rather than on human behavior such as crying, laughing, and talking.
7. Donald's car crashed into the wall, and it was badly damaged.

Exercise 6

Instructions: Using Principles I through V, correct all the pronoun agreement errors in the following paragraphs. The first one has been done for you.

~~An older teenager notices and understands~~ how past actions shape and
Older teenagers notice and understand

have an impact on the present, and [they] can anticipate consequences of present actions.

Because his or her thinking is flexible and fluid, older teens have the cognitive tools to begin to struggle with many of the larger decisions that he will be called on to make. Though you may still turn

to your parents and other adults for advice, teenagers as you gain maturity use an increasingly sophisticated and realistic appraisal of the real possibilities and his own abilities and interests when he makes decisions.

He or she should be encouraged to make their own decisions: whether to work or to go on to further their education, which school to attend, which job to take, whom to date, when to marry and with whom. She can also consider various career directions, religious questions, and political involvements. In addition, many young people cultivate interests in things that interest him or her. He or she may even begin to wrestle with such major questions as the purposes of his or her life.

—adapted from *Your Adolescent* by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Exercise 7

Instructions:

1. Review an essay where your teacher has graded and marked your pronoun agreement errors. Are there any similarities in your errors? Knowing what to look for during proofreading can make it easier to find your pronoun agreement errors.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay