Pronoun Reference and Antecedent Agreement

It’s not as bad as it sounds!

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Pre-test

• What do you already know about Pronoun Reference and Antecedent Agreement?

• http://students.ed.uiuc.edu/ebecker/grammar quiz/
Pronoun

• The part of speech that substitutes for nouns or noun phrases and designates persons or things asked for
  – It can take the place of a subject word
    • (I, you, he, she, it, we, they)
  – It can take the place of an object word
    • (me, you, him, her, it, us, them)
  – It can take the place of a possessive word
    • (my, mine, your, yours, his, hers, its, our, ours, their, theirs)
Pronoun

- *Pro* noun – *for* a noun
  - **NOUN**
  - Kathy
  - Morgan
  - Toni and Nancy
  - Either Rebekah or Jennifer
  - Verizon Wireless
  - The staff
  - Each student
  - Everyone
  - Paper
  - Papers

*For the Noun (Pronoun)*
- she . . . her
- he . . . him
- they . . . them
- she . . . her
- it . . . its
- it . . . its
- his or her . . . he or she
- his or her . . . he or she
- it . . . its . . . whose
- it . . . its . . . whose
Antecedent

• The noun that a pronoun stands for
• *Savanna* purchased an *airline ticket*, and now *she* can’t find *it*.
  – “Savanna” is the antecedent for “she.”
  – “airline ticket” is the antecedent for “it.”
The Rules

• Every pronoun must have a conspicuous antecedent.
• Every pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, gender, and person.
The Rules

• **PRONOUN REFERENCE**
  • Check every pronoun in your sentence to make sure that it has a word to which it refers. If not, reword the sentence.
  • *After braiding Janee’s hair, Andrea decorated them [no word to which this pronoun refers] with beads.* INCORRECT

• **PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT**
  • Locate the word to which every pronoun in the sentence refers (antecedent). Make sure that both the pronoun and the antecedent agree: both are singular, or both are plural.
  • *Don’t be afraid to ask dumb questions; they are easier to handle than dumb mistakes.* [Both the pronoun “they” and its antecedent “questions” are plural.] CORRECT
Number

Number refers to whether a pronoun or noun is singular or plural.

• *Savanna* purchased an *airline ticket*, and now *she* can’t find *it*.
  – *Savanna* is singular; the pronoun *she* is also singular.
  – *Airline ticket* is singular; the pronoun *it* is also singular.

• *Airline passengers* must show their photo-identification cards to the ticket agent.
  – *Airline passengers* is plural; the pronoun *their* is also plural.
PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

SINGULAR PRONOUNS

MASCULINE  FEMININE  NEUTER
he, his, him  she, shis, shim  it, its
she, her, hers

PLURAL PRONOUNS
they, their, theirs, them
Gender

Gender refers to whether a pronoun or noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter.

• *Each passenger* is responsible for getting *his or her* passport.
  – *Each passenger* is a singular genderless antecedent, so the singular pronoun *his or her* is preferred usage.

• *The university* has changed *its* recommendations for the new parking lot facility.
  – *University* is a singular neuter antecedent, so the singular neuter pronoun *its* is used.
Gender continued

Gender refers to whether a pronoun or noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter.

• Will the **judges** please reveal **their** scores?
  -- *Judges* is a plural antecedent (both masculine and feminine), so the plural pronoun **their** is used.

• **Jeni** wants to increase **her** job opportunities by completing **her** college education.
  -- *Jeni* is a singular feminine antecedent, so the singular feminine pronoun **her** is used.

• **Our staff members** completed **their** software training today.
  -- *Our staff members* is a plural neuter antecedent, so the plural pronoun **their** is used.
Gender continued

Gender refers to whether a pronoun or noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter.

• *Justin* presented proper identification before *he* was permitted to board the plane.
  – *Justin* is a singular masculine antecedent, so the singular masculine pronoun *he* is used.

• *Either the Holts or the Bustamantes* will give us *their* advice on our new business.
  – *Either the Holts or the Bustamantes* is a plural antecedent, so the plural pronoun *their* is used.
Person

• Person refers to the point of view from which a sentence is written: first person (the person writing), second person (the person written to), and third person (the person written about)

• Incorrect: When a person turns thirty, your perspective on life changes in many ways. (*The first half of the sentence is written in third person, while the second half is in second person.*)

• Correct: When a person turns thirty, his or her perspective on life changes in many ways. (*The entire sentence is written in third person.*)
The Problems

• When a pronoun refers to either of two antecedents

Incorrect: Liz doesn’t enjoy playing chess with Angie because she is a much better player.

Correct: Liz doesn’t enjoy playing chess with Angie, who is a much better player.

OR Liz, who is a much better player than Angie, doesn’t enjoy playing chess with her.

– Incorrect: Doris told Shirley that she was getting fat.
  (Which one is getting fat?)

– Correct: Shirley said to Doris, “I am getting fat.”
The Problems

• When a pronoun refers to either of two antecedents

Incorrect: Elise’s mother was beaming with pride when she graduated from college with honors.
Correct: When Elise graduated from college with honors, her mother was beaming with pride.

   OR Elise’s mother, who graduated from college with honors, was beaming with pride.
The Problems

• When a pronoun refers to an unspecified antecedent
  – Incorrect: A strange car followed us closely, and he kept blinking his lights at us. (Who kept blinking the lights?)
  – Correct: A strange car followed us closely, and its driver kept blinking his lights at us.
The Problems

• When *this*, *that*, and *which* refer to the general idea of a preceding clause or sentence rather than the preceding word

  – Incorrect: The graduate assistants and adjuncts complained about their working conditions and low income, *which* fell on deaf ears. (*What fell on deaf ears?*)

  – Correct: The graduate assistants and adjuncts complained about their working conditions and low income, *information which* fell on deaf ears.
The Problems

• When *this, that, and which* refer to the general idea of a preceding clause or sentence rather than the preceding word
  – Incorrect: The students could not understand the pronoun reference handout, *which* annoyed them very much. (What annoyed the students?)
  – Correct: The students could not understand the pronoun reference handout, *a fact* which annoyed them very much.
The Problems

• When *this*, *that*, and *which* refer to the general idea of a preceding clause or sentence rather than the preceding word
  
  – Incorrect: It was once believed that a college degree was a ticket to success; however, *this* is certainly not the case now. *(This what?)*
  – Correct: It was once believed that a college degree was a ticket to success; however, *this perception* is certainly not the case now.
The Problems

• When a pronoun refers to an unexpressed but implied noun
  – Incorrect: My husband wants me to become a dancer at Sammy's Go-Go, but I'm not interested in it. (What am I not interested in?)
  – Correct: My husband wants me to become a dancer at Sammy's Go-Go, but I'm not interested in being that kind of dancer.
The Problems

• When *it* is used as something other than an expletive to postpone a subject
  – Incorrect: *It* says in today's paper that the newest shipment of cars from Detroit, Michigan, seems to include outright imitations of European models.
  – Correct: *Today's newspaper* says that the newest shipment of cars from Detroit, Michigan, seems to include outright imitations of European models.
The Problems

• When *they* or *it* is used to refer to something or someone indefinitely, and there is no definite antecedent
  
  – Incorrect: At the job placement office, *they* told me to stop wearing ripped jeans to my interviews. (Who is *they*?)
  
  – Correct: At the job placement office, *my counselor* told me to stop wearing ripped jeans to my interviews.
  
  – Correct: At the job placement office, I was told to stop wearing ripped jeans to my interviews.
The Problems

- When the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent in number, gender, or person
  
  – Incorrect: Any graduate *student*, if *they* are interested, may attend the lecture. (*student*--singular; *they*--plural)
  
  – Correct: Any graduate *student*, if *he* or *she* is interested, may attend the lecture.
The Problems

• When a noun or pronoun has no expressed antecedent
  – Incorrect: In the President's address to the union, he promised no more taxes. (Who is he?)
  – Correct: In his address to the union, the President promised no more taxes.
The Problems

• When nonstandard pronouns replace standard English pronouns
  – Incorrect: Before the students go to Japan, they will need to renew their passports *themselves*.
  – Correct: Before the students go to Japan, they will need to renew their passports *themselves*.

  – Nonstandard Pronouns
  – hisself, theyself, themself, theirself, theirselves

  – Correct Pronouns
  – himself, themselves
The Problems

• When the antecedent is an indefinite singular, genderless pronoun
  – Incorrect and Outdated: Everyone gave his version of the incident. (*Many object to this usage as sexist.*)
  – Correct: Everyone gave his or her version of the incident.
  – Correct: All of them gave their version of the incident.
The Problems

• When the antecedent is an indefinite singular, genderless pronoun
  – Incorrect and Outdated: Everyone is entitled to his own opinions, but not to his own facts.
  – Also Incorrect: Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts.
  – Correct: Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinions, but not to his or her own facts.
The Problems

• When the antecedent is a genderless noun
  – Incorrect and Outdated/Sexist: A lawyer represents his clients.
  – Correct: A lawyer represents his or her clients.
  – Incorrect: Every employee has the combination to their private locker.
  – Correct: Every employee has the combination to his or her private locker.
The Problems

• When the antecedent is a collective noun
  – Incorrect: The choir decided that they would sing gospel music.
  – Correct: The choir decided that it would sing gospel music.
  – Incorrect: The soccer team will play their first game after Labor Day.
  – Correct: The soccer team will play its first game after Labor Day.
The Problems

• When the contraction *it’s* or the non-word *its’* is used for *its*
  – Incorrect: The organization should ask *its’* volunteers to sign consent forms.
  – Correct: The organization should ask its volunteers to sign consent forms.
  – Incorrect: The jury has made *it’s* decision.
  – Correct: The jury has made its decision.
The Problems

• When a possessive pronoun is incorrectly spelled with an apostrophe
  • Incorrect: The article is her’s, the book is his, but the idea is our’s.
  • Correct: The article is hers, the book is his, but the idea is ours.

  – Incorrect Possessive Pronouns
    – our’s, her’s, their’s, your’s, mines
  – Correct Possessive Pronouns: mine, his, hers, theirs, ours, yours
The Problems

• When the pronoun is plural and the antecedent is singular
  – Incorrect: Congress must explain their reason for rejecting the President’s proposal.
  – Correct: Congress must explain its reason for rejecting the President’s proposal.
The Problems

• When the antecedent is plural and the pronoun is singular

  – Incorrect: Nancy and Andrea agree on many of her principles.
  – Correct: Nancy and Andrea agree on many of their principles.
  – Incorrect: Gumbo and jambalaya are the most common dishes in New Orleans, and it is served in huge portions.
  – Correct: Gumbo and jambalaya are the most common dishes in New Orleans, and they are served in huge portions.
The Problems

- When the antecedent is singular and the pronoun is plural
  - Incorrect: Black beans and rice is a popular side dish in Cuban restaurants, and they are usually served with fish.
  - Correct: Black beans and rice is a popular side dish in Cuban restaurants, and it is usually served with fish.
Some Practice

• Many Americans are concerned that the overuse of slang and colloquialisms is corrupting its language.
• The pronoun its does not agree with its antecedent in number or gender.
• Many Americans are concerned that the overuse of slang and colloquialisms is corrupting their language.
Some Practice

• A person should be allowed to make up their mind.
• The pronoun their does not agree with its antecedent.
• A person should be allowed to make up his or her mind.
Even More Practice

• Sylvia was not sure if Candace brought her book.

• **Her** has an ambiguous reference. Does **her** refer to Sylvia or Candace?

• **Sylvia** was not sure if Candace brought **Sylvia’s** book.

• **Sylvia** wondered, “Did Candace bring **my** book?”
More Practice

• Justin continued to attend Professor McNasty’s class even though he disliked him.
• **He and him** have ambiguous references.
• Even though he disliked Professor McNasty, Justin continued to attend his class.
Still Practicing
(Sentences from Hodges’ Harbrace Handbook)

• When class attendance is compulsory, some students feel that education is being forced on them. This is unwarranted.

• This has no clear antecedent.

• When class attendance is compulsory, some students feel that education is being forced on them. This perception is unwarranted.
Still Practicing
(Sentences from Hodges’ Harbrace Handbook)

• My father is a high school band director. It is a profession that requires much patience.
  • It has no expressed antecedent.
• My father is a high school band director. Directing a band is a profession that requires much patience.
Still Practicing

• The cost of living went up another two percent, which caused a serious problem for retired people with a small fixed income.
  • **Which** is incorrectly substituting for the entire idea.
  • The cost of living went up another two percent, a situation which caused a serious problem for retired people with a small fixed income.
  • The cost of living went up another two percent, causing a serious problem for retired people with a small fixed income.
Practice
(Sentence from *HBJ Workbook*)

• Psychologists have reported, with warnings implied, that you cannot always cure depression with Valium.

• You who?

• Psychologists have reported, with warnings implied, that one cannot always cure depression with Valium. OR

• Psychologists have reported, with warnings implied, that a person cannot always cure depression with Valium.
More Practice

• In Arianna Huffington’s article, she argues that the political system is deteriorating.

• The pronoun she does not have a clear antecedent.

• In her article, Arianna Huffington argues that the political system is deteriorating.
What do you think?

• Does this sentence from an online greeting card company contain a pronoun-antecedent agreement error?

• Send a greeting card to Jan Err on their birthday?