

PRONOUN REFERENCES

As you learned in elementary school, pronouns take the place of nouns. Therefore, remember these two simple rules:

1. Be sure that each pronoun in your sentences has an expressed antecedent, a noun for which it is a substitute, and be sure that each pronoun can refer to the appropriate noun only.
2. Be sure that each pronoun agrees in gender and number with the noun (or another pronoun) to which it refers.

TYPICAL PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH RULE 1

Ambiguous Antecedents

Whenever there is the possibility that the antecedent of a pronoun may not be immediately and absolutely clear, repeat the appropriate noun, or express your idea differently.

AMBIGUOUS: Sally told Mary that that she had won the door prize.

CLEARER: Sally told Mary that that Mary had won the door prize.

Sally had the pleasure of informing Mary that she was the winner of the door prize.

AMBIGUOUS: The painting was encased in a highly ornate frame. It pleased him.

CLEARER: The painting was encased in a highly ornate frame. The frame pleased him. (OR) The painting pleased him. (OR) He was pleased by the painting in its highly ornate frame. (OR) He was pleased by the way the highly ornate frame complemented the painting.

Demonstrative Pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns--*this, that, these, those*—are legitimate parts of the English language. But you must use them with care because, in some constructions, the antecedents of these pronouns can be vague.

VAGUE:

It is not yet clear how the drug Raprime affects the body. Based on recent studies, scientists speculate that the X-Y compound in the drug depresses the central nervous system. This raises important questions.

TYPICAL PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH RULE 2

Collective Nouns and References to Organizations

Collective nouns are those that refer to a group of people as a collective whole: *jury, government, tribe, class, audience*. When the name of a business or an organization is used to represent that enterprise as a corporate entity, it also needs to be treated as a collective noun.

Since these collective nouns represent a group of individuals taken as a whole, they technically require a singular pronoun.

The government was firm in its response.

The audience expressed its approval.

The tribe resisted encroachment on its territory.

In a press release, Charity Hospital has stated that it intends to fight the lawsuit.

In many cases, however, writers have in mind not the group acting as a whole, but the actions of members of such groups.

The committe was split in their views.

The use of a plural pronoun in such cases is generally deemed acceptable. But a fail-safe alternative is this: if and when you want to make reference to actions of members of such groups, do so by referring to them explicitly:

Committee members were split in their views.

Government officials have been reticent about expressing their opinions.

Indefinite Pronouns, Generic Nouns, and Nonsexist Language

Perhaps the most problematic area of pronoun reference these days revolves around generic nouns and indefinite pronouns. Generic nouns are those that make reference to hypothetical individuals—a doctor, a teacher—in statements such as "A doctor must always. . . ." Indefinite pronouns include the following:

anybody	everybody	somebody
anyone	everything	someone
anything	nobody	something
each	none	

These generic nouns and pronouns are singular, and therefore require a singular pronoun.

Anything will do as long as it is purple.

The difficulties arise when the reference is to a human being. Traditionally, the singular pronoun used with generic nouns and indefinite pronouns was the masculine form of the

third-person singular (*he, him, his*). Because such usage is now considered sexist, the typical alternative is either *he/she* or *he or she*.

Everybody must bring his or her lunch.
A doctor is expected to put his or her patient first.

The *he or she* construction, however, can become cumbersome or clumsy at times. In such cases, the obvious alternatives are to use plural nouns, or to construct statements in such a way that third-person singular pronouns are not required.

Doctors are expected to put their patients first.
A doctor is expected to focus, first, on the patient.
Individuals who fail to meet these requirements will lose their licenses.
Anyone who engages in such behavior will have to accept its consequences.
Please plan to bring your own lunch.

Avoiding You as an Indefinite Pronoun

The last example in the previous section raises the issue of use of the pronoun *you*. In ordinary conversation, when we are making the type of hypothetical statements that invite use of generic nouns or indefinite pronouns, we usually use the second person (*you, your*).

If you expect to be a good doctor, you need to think of your patients first.

While acceptable in informal situations, or in cases in which the writer is purposefully and legitimately addressing readers, the second person should otherwise be avoided. One alternative, of course, is the indefinite *one*.

When one is insulted, one should try to ignore the affront. If one's ego will not tolerate. . . .

Unfortunately, in English *one* has a very formal, "stuffy" feel to it.

In those situations in which you find yourself using *you*, the first thing to do is ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish. Are you "lecturing" your readers? If so, is such lecturing appropriate to the purpose of the text? If, in fact, you are making the sorts of generalized, hypothetical statements that call for indefinite pronouns and/or generic nouns, try those solutions suggested in the previous section.