

PRONOUNS AND ANTECEDENTS

Pronouns enable us to communicate efficiently. They provide short forms that save us from the boredom of repetitious nouns. But they can also get us in trouble if the nouns to which they refer—their *antecedents*—are unclear.

Making Pronoun References Clear

Do not use a pronoun if your listener or reader might not be able to identify the noun it represents.

Unclear: Ms Harrison heard Luke tell Jason that he would be late.

Clear: Ms. Harrison heard Luke tell Jason that Luke would be late.

Unclear: In that restaurant they do not allow you to smoke.

Clear: The restaurant management does not allow its patrons to smoke.

Making Pronouns Agree with the Antecedents in Number

Pronouns must agree in number with the nouns they represent. For example, if a pronoun replaces a singular noun, that pronoun must be singular.

- Michelangelo felt that he was a failure.
- Great artists often doubt their success.

If a pronoun refers to two nouns joined by *and*, the pronoun must be plural.

- The president and the stockholders discussed their differences.
- Kyle and James asked that suggestions be sent to them.

Pronoun-antecedent agreement can be complicated when words or phrases come between the pronoun and the word to which it refers. Disregard phrases such as those introduced by *as well as*, *in addition to*, and *together with*. Find the true antecedent and make the pronoun agree with it.

- The CEO, together with all department heads, is sending his personal thanks.
- The department heads, along with the CEO, have submitted their plans.
- A female member of the group of protesting employees demanded that she be treated equally.

Making Pronouns Agree with Their Antecedents in Gender

Pronouns exhibit one of three genders: masculine (male), feminine (female), or neuter (neither masculine nor feminine). Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in gender.

- Patrick read his assignment.

- Amy studied her notes.
- The idea had its limits.

Choosing Alternatives to Common-Gender Antecedents

Occasionally, writers and speakers face a problem in choosing pronouns of appropriate gender. English has no all-purpose singular pronoun to represent indefinite nouns (such as *a student* or *an employee*). For this reason writers and speaker have, over the years, used masculine, or common-gender, pronouns to refer to nouns that might be either masculine or feminine. For example, in the sentence *An employee has his rights*, the pronoun *his* referred to its antecedent *employee*, which might name either a feminine or masculine person.

Communicators today, however, avoid masculine pronouns (*he, his*) when referring to indefinite nouns that could be masculine or feminine. Critics call these pronouns “sexist” because they exclude women. To solve the problem, sensitive communicators rewrite those sentences requiring such pronouns. Although many alternatives exist, here are three options:

- Common Gender:** An employee has his job to do.
Alternative No. 1: Employees have their jobs to do.
Alternative No. 2: An employee has a job to do.
Alternative No. 3: An employee has his or her job to do.
Wrong: An employee has their job to do.

Antecedents Joined by *Or* or *Nor*

When antecedents are joined by *or* or *nor*, the pronoun should agree with the antecedent closer to it.

- Either Alice or Vicki left her coat in the office.
- Neither the manager nor the employees objected to their salary cuts.

You may be wondering why antecedents joined by *and* are treated differently from antecedents joined by *or/nor*. The conjunction *and* joins one plus one to make two antecedents; hence, a plural pronoun is used. The conjunction *or/nor* require a choice between two antecedents. Always match the pronoun to the closer antecedent.

Indefinite Pronouns as Antecedents

Pronouns such as *anyone*, *something*, and *anybody* are called *indefinite* because they refer to no specific person or object. Some indefinite pronouns are always singular; others are always plural.

<u>Always Singular</u>		<u>Always Plural</u>
anybody	everything	both
anyone	neither	few
anything	nobody	many
each	no one	several
either	nothing	
everybody	somebody	
everyone	someone	

When indefinite pronouns function as antecedents of pronouns, make certain that the pronoun agrees with its antecedent. Do not let prepositional phrases obscure the true antecedent.

- Somebody in the men's league left his car lights on.
- Each of the corporations had its own home office.
- Few of the vendors missed the show to demonstrate their equipment.
- Several of our branches list their job openings on the company's intranet.

Collective Nouns as Antecedents

Words such as *jury*, *faculty*, *committee*, *union*, *team*, and *group* are called *collective* nouns because they refer to a collection of people, animals, or objects. Such words may be either singular or plural depending on the mode of operation of the collection to which they refer. When a collective noun operates as a unit, it is singular. When the elements of a collective noun operate separately, the collective noun is plural.

- Our staff reaffirmed its position on bargaining.
- The management team of Rosen and Garcia, Inc., is planning its strategy.
- The jury were divided in their opinions.

However, if a collective noun is to be used in a plural sense, the sentence can often be made to sound less awkward by the addition of a plural noun (*The jury members were divided in their opinions*).

Company and Organization Names as Antecedents

Company and organization names are generally considered singular. Unless the actions of the organization are attributed to individual representatives or that organization, pronouns referring to organizations should be singular.

- Sears is having its biggest annual sale ever.
- The United Nations, in addition to other organizations, is expanding its campaign to fight hunger.

- Downey, Felker, & Torees, Inc., plans to move its corporate headquarters.

The Antecedents *Each, Every, and Many A*

If the limiting adjectives *each*, *every*, and *many a* describe either noun or both nouns in a compound antecedent, that antecedent is considered singular.

- Every player and coach on the women’s soccer team has her assigned duties.
- Many a father and son will receive his award at the banquet.

The Challenge of *Who* and *Whom*

In conversation, speakers may have difficulty analyzing a sentence quickly enough to use the correct *who/whom* form. In writing, however, an author has ample time to scrutinize a sentence and make a correct choice—if the author understands the traditional functions of *who* and *whom*. *Who* is the nominative-case form. Like other nominative-case pronouns, *who* may function as the subject of a verb or as the subject complement of a noun following the linking verb. *Whom* is the objective-case form. It may function as the object of a verb or as the object of a preposition.

- Who do you think will be chosen to direct the play?
- Paula asked who your friend is.
- Whom should we hire?
- She is the clerk to whom I spoke.

How to Choose Between *Who* and *Whom*

The choice between *who* and *whom* becomes easier if the sentence in question is approached according to the following procedure:

1. Isolate the *who/whom* clause.
2. Invert the clause, if necessary, to restore the normal subject-verb-object order.
3. Substitute the nominative pronoun *he* (*she* or *they*) for *who*. Substitute the objective pronoun *him* (*her* or *them*) for *whom*. If the sentence sounds correct with *him*, replace *him* with *whom*. If the sentence sounds correct with *he*, replace *he* with *who*.

The Use of *Whoever* and *Whomever*

Whoever, of course, is nominative and *whomever* is objective. The selection of the correct form is sometimes complicated when *whoever* or *whomever* appears in clauses. These clauses may act as objects of prepositions, objects of verbs, or subjects of verbs. Within the clauses, however, you must determine how *whoever* or *whomever* is functioning in order to choose the correct form. Study the following examples and explanations.

- Send the supplies to whoever needs them.

- Special provision will be made for whoever meets the conditions.
- We will accept the name of whomever they nominate.

Pronoun and Antecedents Exercises

Directions: Select the correct word(s) to complete the following sentences.

1. When a technician comes to service a computer, (he, she, he or she, they) usually brings the proper tools.
2. In addition to other family members, the winner was sent tickets for (his, her, his or her, their) personal use.
3. The visiting scientist and our resident engineer had (his, her, his or her, their) problems finding the control center.
4. No veterinarian's assistant will be assigned to that task until (he is, she is, he or she is, they are) trained.
5. One of the players on the boys' team lost (his, their) game shirt.
6. After a contractor signs, (he is, she is, he or she is, they are) responsible for fulfilling the terms of the contract.
7. One of the women asked how many sick days (she, they) had accumulated.
8. All flight attendants must have (her, his, his or her, their) uniforms cleaned regularly.
9. Norberto, after consulting the production staff and others, made (his, their) pricing decision.
10. No employees must automatically retire when (he reaches, she reaches, he or she reaches, they reach) the age of 65.
11. Someone attending the meeting left (his, her, his or her, their) car lights on.
12. Apparently, neither the attachment nor the letters had (its, their) contents proofread very carefully.
13. Dun & Bradstreet bases (its, their) credit services on accounting reports.
14. Someone on the girls' squad lost one of (her, their) shoes.
15. Each man, woman, and child in the club made (his, her, his or her, their) own contribution to the canned food drive.

16. Either Paula Roddy or Mary Xaveir will present (her, their) research findings at the meeting.
17. Nobody in the boisterous crowd could hear (his, her, his or her, their) name when called.
18. The president asked for budget cuts, and Congress indicated (its, their) willingness to legislate some of them.
19. Neither of the men would admit (his, their) part in causing the accident.
20. The Small Business Administration sent (its, their) experts to aid flood victims.
21. (Who, Whom) do you think we should hire as they new webmaster?
22. I know perfectly well (who, whom) you are.
23. Are you the individual (who, whom) submitted an application?
24. The contract will be awarded to (whoever, whomever) submits the lowest bid.
25. Jackie Harliss-Chang is the investment counselor of (who, whom) I spoke.
26. When I return the call for (who, whom) should I ask?
27. (Who, Whom) did you say would drop by?
28. Will you recommend an attorney (who, whom) can handle this case?
29. To (who, whom) did you address the invitation?
30. Cash prizes were awarded to (whoever, whomever) the judges selected.