



OWLS Writing Guides:

PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

A pronoun is a word that substitutes for a noun. Some pronouns are used as the subject of a sentence; these pronouns are *I, we, you, he/she/it, they*. Other pronouns are used as objects in a sentence; these pronouns are *me, us, you, him/her/it, them*. Still other pronouns are used to show possession; these pronouns are *my/mine, your/yours, our/ours, his/her/hers/its, their/theirs, whose*.

Subjective pronoun: *She* threw the final pitch of the day.

Objective pronoun: Pat threw the ball to *her*.

Possessive pronoun: That is *her* ball.

Pronouns often have **antecedents**, nouns or pronouns to which they refer.

Detective Miles spent hours gathering evidence for the case **he** hoped to solve.

Here, *he* refers to the antecedent *Detective Miles*.

A pronoun and its antecedent should agree. That is, a singular pronoun should agree with its singular antecedent, and a plural pronoun should agree with its plural antecedent.

An **indefinite pronoun** is a pronoun that refers to a nonspecific person or thing. Although some indefinite pronouns sound plural, they are singular. These pronouns are *anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, none, no one, somebody, someone, something*.

Common errors

1. Problems can occur when the sentence contains compound subjects or objects. To figure out which pronoun to use, strip away the rest of the sentence.

Error: While searching for evidence, Detective Miles and **her** found a pocket watch made of solid gold.

Correct: **She** found a pocket watch made of solid gold.

Error: The most important discovery for the Detective and **I** occurred when we opened the watch.

Correct: The most important discovery for the Detective and **me**

2. Look out for indefinite pronouns and generic nouns, which are singular.

Error: When **someone** has been drinking, **they** are more likely to speed.

Correct: When **someone** has been drinking, **he or she** *is* more likely to speed.

Error: **A student** must study hard if **they** want to succeed.

Correct: **A student** must study hard if **he or she** *wants* to succeed.

Notice that changing the number of the pronoun and antecedent will change the number of a present tense verb also.

If using “he or she” makes the sentence sound awkward, you may change the antecedent from a singular to a plural one.

An employee working overtime must report **his or her** additional hours to payroll.

may be changed to . . .

Employees working overtime must report **their** additional hours to payroll.

3. Collective nouns such as audience, crowd, family, team, and jury are considered singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

The jury *delivers its* verdict at noon. (The group acting as a unit.)

The jury *take their* seats in the courtroom. (The members of the group acting as individuals.)

4. When using compound antecedents connected by *or* or *nor* or by *either/or* or by *neither/nor*, make the pronoun agree with the nearest antecedent. If one subject is singular and one is plural, you should put the plural subject second to avoid awkwardness. Also, if your subjects are two different genders, rearrange the sentence to avoid confusion.

Neither Marilyn nor her cousins could find **their** way out of a paper bag.

Either Marilyn or Margaret should receive first place for **her** project.

Either Marilyn or Christopher should receive first place for cooking.