

# Making Sure Nouns and Pronouns Agree

A pronoun is a word that replaces one or more nouns. Pronouns must agree with nouns in a sentence in much the same way that subjects must agree with verbs.

## *Example*

The students complained to the principal about the quality of the cafeteria food. They claim that he isn't concerned about whether it is healthy for them to eat.

The pronouns *they* and *them* replace the noun *students*. The pronoun *he* replaces the noun *principal*.

The pronoun *it* replaces the noun *food*.

## *Example*

The clown wore big shoes and a big nose. They were both red.

The pronoun *they* replaces the nouns *shoes* and *nose*.

A pronoun can also replace another pronoun.

## *Example*

One of the DVD players is disconnected. It is missing a cable. The pronoun *it* replaces the pronoun *one* in this sentence.

## **Antecedents**

An *antecedent* is the word to which the pronoun refers. In the previous example, *one* is the antecedent of *it*. To use pronouns correctly, you must make sure they agree in number with their antecedent. In other words, a singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun and a plural antecedent requires a plural pronoun. When a noun is the antecedent, it is usually pretty clear whether it is singular or plural. It gets more confusing when a pronoun is the antecedent. Thankfully, the rules for noun/pronoun agreement are very similar to the rules for subject/verb agreement.

### **Singular Pronouns**

Here is a list of singular pronouns:

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

A pronoun with one of the words from this list as its antecedent must be singular.

#### ***Example***

*Each* of the women tried to swim *her* fastest and win the race.

#### ***Example***

*Nobody* brought *his* or *her* favorite dessert to the potluck dinner.

**Note : Except for : somebody, anyone, someone, everybody , we can use plural pronouns , when talking in general.**

#### ***Example***

If someone wants to change their major they can consult their academic mentor.

### **Plural Pronouns**

Here is a list of plural pronouns:

**Several - few - both - many**

If two or more singular nouns or pronouns are joined by *and*, use a plural pronoun.

#### ***Example***

If *he* and *she* were on time, *they* wouldn't have missed the bus.

#### ***Example***

*Brad* and *Janet* believe in *their* chances to win the election.

If two or more singular nouns or pronouns are joined by *or*, use a singular pronoun.

***Example***

*Walt* or *Jim* will provide *his* expertise.

Two or more singular pronoun antecedents followed by singular pronouns can make for some awkward sentences. It follows the pronoun agreement rule, but you should consider revising any sentences that use this construction.

***Example***

*He* or *she* wants *his* or *her* notebook back.

If a singular and a plural noun or pronoun are joined by *or* or *nor*, the pronoun agrees with its closest antecedent.

***Example***

Neither the photographer nor his models like the setting for the shoot.

***Example***

Neither the models nor the photographer likes the setting for the shoot.

***Example***

David disagrees with the council about how to proceed. Either *he* or *they* will get *their* way.

***Example***

The council disagrees with David about how to proceed. Either *they* or *he* will get *his* way.

While it is important to know the rules when using pronouns, occasionally their use does not make for clear and concise writing. When editing and revising your paper, rearranging the structure of a sentence or paragraph can allow you to eliminate awkward pronouns.

**Exercise 1**

Select the correct pronoun in each of the following sentences.

1. Anyone who wants a ride to the concert must put (**his**, **their**) name on the sign-up sheet.
2. Neither Alex nor his classmates could find (**his**, **their**) homework.

3. Almost anybody can make (**his, their**) own birdhouse.
4. Melissa or Tamica will loan you (**her, their**) pencil.
5. Frank and Andre made (**his, their**) script into a video.

### **Cases of Pronouns**

Personal pronouns come in three cases: *nominative*, *objective*, and *possessive*. The table below shows the cases of all the personal pronouns, both singular and plural.

	<b>NOMINATIVE</b>	<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>POSSESSIVE</b>
First person:	I	me	my
Second person:	We	us	our
	You	you	your
Third person:	He	him	his
	She	her	hers
	They	them	their
	It	it	its

### **Nominative Case Pronouns**

The subject of a verb is in the nominative case. When a pronoun is the subject of the verb in a sentence, the pronoun must be in the nominative case. Most writers do this without thinking.

#### ***Example***

*He* is a good worker.

Not “*him* is a good worker,” or “*his* is a good worker.” *He* is the subject, so it appears in the nominative case.

When the pronoun follows a linking verb, however, the correct usage may sound awkward.

#### ***Examples***

The landscape architect who designed the garden is *he*.

“It is *I*,” said my brother.

## **Objective Case Pronouns**

Objective case pronouns are used as the object in a sentence. They usually follow an action verb or act as the object of a preposition.

### ***Example***

The crossing guard gave *him* a wave.

The pronoun *him* follows the action word *gave*, so it is in the objective case.

### ***Example***

We went to the park with Jordan and *her*.

The pronoun *her* is the object of the preposition *with*, so it is in the objective case.

### ***Example***

This is between you and *me*.

The pronoun *me* is the object of the preposition *between*, so it is in the objective case.

## **Possessive Case Pronouns**

Possessive case pronouns show possession.

### ***Example***

The shoes are *his*.

The shoes belong to him, so he possesses them.

The possessive pronoun *his* is used.

### ***Example***

That is *our* way of celebrating the new season.

Whose way is it? The way belongs to us, so it is *our* way.

The possessive case rarely presents problems.

The nominative and objective cases, however, can be tricky.

## **Pronoun Case Problems**

Most writers do not have agreement problems when pronouns are used alone in a sentence.

### ***Example***

He sat at the table.

When pronouns are used with a noun or another pronoun, it can be confusing.

### ***Examples of incorrect usage***

The taxi driver drove my neighbor and I to the store.

Jimmy and me are going to work in Georgia.

The mechanic spoke to he and I about the repairs.

One strategy for ensuring that you are using the correct case with your pronouns is to separate the sentence into two sentences.

***Examples of separated sentences***

The taxi driver drove my neighbor to the store.

The taxi driver drove I to the store.

The second sentence should read: The taxi driver drove *me* to the store.

Jimmy is going to work in Georgia.

Me is going to work in Georgia.

The second sentence should read: *I am* going to work in Georgia.

The mechanic spoke to he about the repairs.

This sentence should read: the mechanic spoke to *him* about the repairs.

The mechanic spoke to I about the repairs.

This sentence should read: the mechanic spoke to *me* about the repairs.

When a sentence contains the preposition *between*, splitting sentences does not work. Try substituting *with* for *between*.

***Example of incorrect usage***

The problem is between she and I.

***Examples of separated sentences***

The problem is with she.

This sentence should read: The problem is with *her*.

The problem is with I.

This sentence should read: The problem is with *me*.

***Example of correct sentence***

The problem is between her and me.

**Exercise 2**

Select the correct pronouns in each of the following sentences.

6. The conductor let (**he, him**) and (**I, me**) stand at the podium.
7. My good friend and (**I, me**) want to join the chess club.
8. "It is (**I, me**)," he said. "I have come to vote."
9. Deena and (**she, her**) went to the playground with Frances and (**I, me**).
10. Have you heard the gossip about (**she, her**) and (**they, them**)?
11. Neither my teacher nor my classmates know what (**he, they**) will read next.
12. The guests thanked Gita and (**she, her**) for the party.
13. What were you telling Earl and (**we, us**) before?
14. I remember Jan and (**she, her**).
15. You and (**he, him**) have been studying all weekend.

**Ambiguous Pronoun Reference**

Sometimes a sentence is written with more than one antecedent, making it ambiguous. Ambiguous means it can have two or more possible meanings;

therefore, the antecedent to which the pronoun refers is unclear.

***Example***

Markella screamed at Stephanie, and *she* seemed scared.

It is unclear whether the pronoun *she* refers to Stephanie or Markella.

***Example***

Edgar told Greg *he* was supposed to leave.

It is unclear whether the pronoun *he* refers to Edgar or Greg.

***Example***

Separate the fern from the flower and replant *it*.

It is unclear whether *it* refers to the fern or the flower.

To eliminate this problem, revise your sentences so that it is clear to which antecedent the pronoun refers.

***Examples of revised sentences***

Markella screamed at Stephanie, and Stephanie seemed scared.  
Edgar was supposed to leave, so he told Greg.

Replant the flower after separating it from the fern.

**Improper Reflexive Pronouns**

A reflexive pronoun is one that includes the word *self* or *selves*. The table below shows the most common reflexive pronouns.

myself	yourself	himself
herself	ourselves	themselves

Nominative case pronouns are never used to make reflexive pronouns.

***Example***

I took the ball *I*self.

In fact, to create reflexive pronouns, you add *self* or *selves* to the objective case pronouns for the third person, which are *him*, *her*, and *them*. You add *self* or *selves* to the first and second person in the possessive case, which are *my*, *our*, and *your*. If this sounds confusing, look at the table of pronouns in the three cases in this lesson, and use your ear. You cannot make the pronouns *me*, *us*, *you*, *his*, or *their* reflexive.

***Examples of incorrect usage***

They were determined to complete the project *themselves*.

I will drink the last of the milk *meself*.

Boris took over the responsibilities *hissself*.

***Examples of correct usage***

They were determined to complete the project *themselves*.

I will drink the last of the milk *myself*.

Boris took over the responsibilities *himself*.



When a personal pronoun works in a sentence, do not use a reflexive pronoun.

***Examples of incorrect usage***

The plans to tear down the barn were known only by *ourselves*.

Three good singers and *myself* were chosen for the vocal group.

***Examples of correct usage***

The plans to tear down the barn were known only by *us*.

Three good singers and *I* were chosen for the vocal group.

Reflexive pronouns should be used only to refer to another word in the same sentence or to

emphasize another word. Any other use should be edited and revised from your writing.