

Pronoun Rules

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns. To understand the rules of pronouns, a writer must first be able to identify the main subject and verb of a sentence.*

Examples: The **student** **wrote** an excellent paper.
subject verb

The **student** **researched** her topic, which was related to the content of her sociology class,
subject verb
 and then **she** **wrote** an excellent paper.
subject verb

Once you understand how to identify the subject and the verb of a sentence, the pronoun rules are simple.

Rule 1: Sometimes a pronoun refers to a noun already stated in the sentence. This replaced noun is called an *antecedent*. The pronoun should be placed fairly close to its antecedent and agree in gender and number.

Examples: The coach chose these **players** because **they** had the most experience on the field.
noun pronoun
(antecedent)

The **pants** and **shoes** **came** in the mail, but **they** did not fit very well.
subject nouns verb pronoun
(antecedent)

Brian and **I** **gave** our friends directions where to meet **us** for dinner.
subject nouns verb pronoun
(antecedent)

Rule 2: When the gender is unknown and not essential, be inclusive –use male and female pronouns. The exclusive use of male pronouns may be perceived as sexist. The English language has one gender neutral pronoun "it," but a few other options help to avoid sexist language.

Solution 1: Use both masculine and feminine pronouns.

Example: An **American** **has** a right to cast **his** or **her** vote. (gender neutral)
subject verb pronouns
noun

- Repeated usage of both masculine and feminine pronouns can become awkward, so use sparingly.

Solution 2: Completely rewrite the sentence without a pronoun.

Example: **Everyone** **has** a right to vote. (gender neutral)
subject verb
noun

Solution 3: Instead of using gender specific pronouns, use the plural form of the subject noun (the antecedent) and the corresponding pronoun. Be sure to check that the verb's tense matches with the subject.

Examples: Everyone has a right to cast his vote. (sexist)

subject verb pronoun
noun

All citizens have a right to cast their votes. (gender neutral)

subject verb pronoun
noun

Rule 3: Pronoun number. Some nouns refer to a class or a group. These collective nouns such as *group*, *committee*, and *family*, use either a singular OR plural pronoun depending on whether the writer is referring to the group as a single unit OR to the individual members of the group. The meaning of the sentence depends somewhat on the surrounding sentences.

Examples: The committee made its decision based on several reports.

subject verb singular
noun pronoun

(as a single unit)

The committee put their signatures on the new policy.

subject verb plural
noun pronoun

(as individual members)

Rule 4: When used as subjects, **non-count pronouns** such as *any*, *anybody*, *anyone*, *each*, *either*, *enough*, *everybody*, *everyone*, *few*, *little*, *many*, *much*, *neither*, *nobody*, *some*, *somebody*, *someone* take singular verbs and singular pronouns.

Examples: Neither is going to the concert, so he or she needs to give the tickets away.

subject verb
pronoun

subject verb
pronouns

Someone needs to take the garbage out, but nobody volunteers to do it.

subject verb
pronoun

subject verb
pronoun

Rule 5: Geography of Pronoun Usage. Subjective/Objective Case has to do with where the pronoun appears in the sentence. That's all. If the pronoun appears before the main verb, then it is subjective (*I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *we*, *they*, *who*). If the pronoun appears after the main verb, then it is objective (*me*, *you*, *him*, *her*, *it*, *us*, *them*, *who*, *whom*).

Subjective Examples: He told Carol that the movie was not very good.

subjective main
pronoun verb

They expected the professor to attend class.

subjective main
pronoun verb

Objective Examples:

Carol **told him** that the movie was not very good.

main objective
verb pronoun

The professor **expected them** to attend class.

main objective
verb pronoun

Proper use of *who* and *whom*. The differentiation between using *who* and *whom* in speech seems to be disappearing, but it is still important to distinguish the difference in academic writing. To do so, first determine if the *who* or *whom* is referring to the subject or object of the verb. The subject is the “doer” of the verb; the object takes the action of the verb. For subjects, use *who*; for objects, use *whom*.

Examples: Who wrote this amazing story?
subject verb
pronoun

- Someone, he or she, wrote the story, so *who* is used as the subject.

Jake gave whom your amazing story?
subject verb object
noun pronoun

- The story is being given to someone; *whom* in this sentence is taking the action of the verb *gave*.

*** Please see the chart at the end of the handout for more examples.

Rule 6: Possessive Pronouns are used to indicate ownership. No apostrophes are necessary when using possessive pronouns.

Example: Mary took her dog for a walk.
subject verb noun
noun
possessive pronoun

His friends brought chips and salsa to the party.
possessive subject verb
pronoun noun

*** Please see the chart at the end of the handout for more examples.

*For further explanation of subjects and verbs, please see the JCCC Writing Center subject-verb agreement handout.

Types of Pronouns

Subjective Pronouns (occurs before the main verb)	Main Verb	Objective Pronouns (occurs after the main verb)
I	saw	me
you		you
he/she/it		him, her, it
we		us
who		whom
they		them

Examples: You saw us. We saw you. They saw her. He saw it. I saw him. She saw them. Who saw us?

Possessive Pronouns (indicates ownership)		
my, mine	takes	my, mine
our, ours		our, ours
your, yours		your, yours
his		his
her, hers		her, hers
its		its
their, theirs		their, theirs
whose		whose

Examples: Mine takes yours. Ours takes hers. Yours takes his. Theirs takes ours. Whose takes mine?

These are the basic pronoun rules; for more complex rules, please see Writing Center staff or several handbooks available in the JCCC Writing Center.

For exercises to practice your pronoun skills, please see Writing Center staff.