

**JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE
FAULTY REFERENCE OF PRONOUNS (MA3B)**

Pronoun reference errors can be avoided by following these principles:

1. The antecedent of every pronoun should be immediately clear to the reader.

A pronoun usually refers to a definite person or thing.

For coherence, a pronoun should be placed as close as possible to its antecedent.

It is easier to catch a faulty reference of pronouns if you read your rough draft aloud.

2. Do not use a pronoun in such a way that it might refer to either of two antecedents. If there is any possibility of doubt, revise the sentence to remove the ambiguity.

ambiguous: Virginia told her sister that she was unforgiving. (Who was unforgiving--Virginia or her sister?)

clear: Virginia said to her sister, "You are unforgiving."
or
Virginia thought her sister was unforgiving and told her so.

ambiguous: In *Nostramo* Conrad's style is ironic and his setting is highly symbolic, so that it sometimes confuses the reader. (Does "it" refer to *Nostramo*, Conrad's style, his setting, or a combination of these?)

clear: In *Nostramo*, Conrad's ironic style and highly symbolic setting sometimes confuse the reader.

clear: In *Nostramo*, Conrad's style is ironic, and his highly symbolic setting sometimes confuses the reader.

3. If a pronoun's antecedent is remote enough to cause a possible misreading, either repeat the antecedent or rewrite the sentence.

remote: Two major highways converge at the sign, each lined with huge, ugly billboards rising above the corn stalks and obscuring the gently rolling hills. It is a convenient location for hitching rides. (The pronoun "it" is too far removed from its antecedent, "sign.")

clear: The major highways converge at the sign, each lined with huge, ugly billboards rising above the corn stalks and obscuring the gently rolling hills. The sign is a convenient location for hitching rides. (Antecedent is repeated.)

clear: Two major highways converge at the sign, a convenient location for hitching rides. Each highway is lined with huge, ugly billboards rising above the corn stalks and obscuring the gently rolling hills. (Sentences have been rewritten.)

remote: The waitress locked the door, slapped at the flies, and then sat down wearily to rest for a

minute before cleaning up the litter. But they gave her no peace. (Antecedent “flies” is too remote from “they.”)

clear: change to: But the flies gave her no peace.

remote: By the end of Oedipus’ life he had gained self-knowledge. (“Oedipus” is a noun used as an adjective to modify “life,” and therefore not clear enough to use as an antecedent.)

clear: By the end of his life Oedipus had gained self-knowledge.

remote: The Tzotzil Indians are only nominal Catholics, using its (whose?!) symbols and adapting them to the traditional Mayan religion.

clear: The Tzotzil Indians are only nominal Catholics, using the symbols and names of the Church and adapting them to the traditional Mayan religion.

Remote : The botanist told us the plants’ names which were all around us.

clear: The botanist told us the names of the plants which were all around us.

4. In informal usage, the relative pronouns that, this, and which are frequently used to refer to the whole idea of a preceding clause or sentence. In formal usage, these pronouns are usually expected to have a particular word as their antecedent. No hard and fast rules can be given here. Sometimes the broad reference is clear and a change would be awkward.

acceptable: The game ended a little before ten which gave us plenty of time to catch our train home.

broad reference: At first glance, the desert seems completely barren of animal life, but this is an illusion.

Often, though, broad reference can make a sentence sound awkward. It may also be ambiguous if the preceding clause contains a noun which might be mistaken for the antecedent. If you are in doubt, rewrite the sentence to eliminate the pronoun or else give the pronoun a definite antecedent.

loose: The beginning of the book is more interesting than the conclusion, which is very unfortunate. (which refers to what?)

clear: Unfortunately, the beginning of the book is more interesting than the conclusion. (The misleading pronoun which has been eliminated by rewriting the sentence.)

5. Some idiomatic expressions in which the impersonal use of it, they, and you are acceptable: “it is hot,” “it rained all day,” “it is late,” “it snowed all night.” The pronoun it is also used correctly in sentences, such as “It seems best to go home at once.” In this case, it anticipates the real subject, to go home at once. Avoid, however, the unexplained it, the it that needs a clear antecedent.

vague: Our neighbor was a semi-professional who took every spare moment he could to practice it. (It refers to what?)

clear: Our neighbor was a semi-professional golfer who took every spare moment he

could get to practice his game.

Writing Center

Avoid the indefinite use of they. The result sounds vague and childish.

vague: If intercollegiate sports were banned, they would have to develop an elaborate intramural program. (They refers back to sports, and this is not what the writer intended.)

clear: If intercollegiate sports were banned, each college would have to develop an elaborate intramural program.

vague: Thirty years ago there was no such thing as a hydrogen bomb; they didn't even know how to split the atom.

clear: Thirty years ago there was no hydrogen bomb; scientists did not even know how to split the atom.

Also avoid the indefinite use of you. Only if your audience has made it clear in the beginning of a paragraph or essay, can you be used. Formal usage prefers the impersonal pronoun one or a passive verb unless the context clearly implies the definite audience or person addressed.

informal: You shouldn't take sulfa drugs without a doctor's prescription.

formal: One should not take sulfa drugs without a doctor's prescription.

standard: Sulfa drugs should not be taken without a doctor's prescription.
(passive voice)

PRACTICE EXERCISE

PART A. Revise the following sentences by correcting the ambiguous reference of pronouns:

1. The runner lunged toward the tape, threw out his chest, and snapped it.
2. In the course of the argument, Jack told his father that he needed a new car.
3. It wouldn't hurt people to read about criminals because they live in a different kind of world, and they don't have to follow their example.
4. Both parents were there when the two brothers graduated together, and we couldn't help noticing how happy they were.
5. She mixed the sugar with eggs and milk, which dissolved quickly.

PART B. Revise the following sentences in which the reference of pronouns is vague:

1. After driving in the desert temperature, we were cooled that evening by mountain breezes, ice cubes, and long, icy showers. It was a record.
2. Under Roosevelt's leadership, the Democratic party, which had not really been united under one man for some years, came together effectively for a time. Historians tend to agree that this was a case of the right man at the right moment.
3. The hives buzzed with activity, and the beekeeper covered himself with netting before going after the honey and then mentioned for us to follow at a distance. They were about fifty feet away.
4. In Joyce's novel, he delights in complex puns and in playing with words.
5. The spider gently shook the strands of his web as he scurried toward the fly and the moth. Although they were barely visible, they were obviously strong.
6. Engineering is the profession that applies scientific knowledge to the building of such things as bridges, harbors, and communication systems. This is my ambition.
7. No two critics I have read share the same views about the degree of Don Quixote's madness. That is the controversy.
8. Ethics must not be understood to be the same thing as honor because this is not the case.
9. When there is no harmony in the home, the child is the first to feel it.
10. Most of the students at the work camp were inexperienced, and many of them had never seen

poverty before, but on the whole they were up to it.

11. It says in the brochure that in England they drink tea instead of coffee.
12. You can be sure that the college won't liberalize women's hours because they feel responsible to parents, or so they say, anyhow.

PART C. Revise the following sentences to eliminate the faulty reference of pronouns.

1. The trunks were too bulky and much too awkward to cart around, so they made smaller and more compact ones.
2. The narrator thought only of his present happiness and showed no regard for his future well being, which is clearly demonstrated during his last two years of college and his three years of marriage.
3. The article starts out with a quotation from James Madison which says that a government with a standing military force could enslave the people because they may feel like taking powers that do not belong to them.
4. Since the white settlers held the Indians to be of no significant value, they regarded their rights as equally nonexistent.