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.*

*Example*: The student wrote an excellent paper.

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

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.

*Example*: The coach chose these players because they had the most experience on the field.

The pants and shoes came in the mail, but they did not fit very well.

Brian and I gave our friends directions where to meet us for dinner.

**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)

- 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)
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)

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

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. (as a single unit)

The committee put their signatures on the new policy. (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.

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

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.

They expected the professor to attend class.
**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 noun verb object 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.

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**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

  - possessive pronoun

- His friends *brought* chips and salsa to the party.

- possessive subject verb noun

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Subjective Pronouns</strong> (occurs before the main verb)</th>
<th><strong>Main Verb</strong></th>
<th><strong>Objective Pronouns</strong> (occurs after the main verb)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td></td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/she/it</td>
<td>saw</td>
<td>him, her, it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td></td>
<td>us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who</td>
<td></td>
<td>whom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td></td>
<td>them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Possessive Pronouns</strong> (indicates ownership)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>my, mine</td>
<td></td>
<td>my, mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our, ours</td>
<td></td>
<td>our, ours</td>
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<tr>
<td>your, yours</td>
<td></td>
<td>your, yours</td>
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<tr>
<td>his</td>
<td>takes</td>
<td>his</td>
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<tr>
<td>her, hers</td>
<td></td>
<td>her, hers</td>
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<tr>
<td>its</td>
<td></td>
<td>its</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their, theirs</td>
<td></td>
<td>their, theirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whose</td>
<td></td>
<td>whose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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.