

Pronouns

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BASIC RULES

1. **Pronouns** take the place of nouns and are used instead of a previously stated noun, called the **antecedent**:

Example: I knew **Chris** was out because **he** left a note. (*he is a pronoun substituting for the proper noun **Chris**.*)

2. A pronoun must agree with the number of the antecedent.

Example: *Incorrect:* Although the **politician** makes many promises, **they** rarely **keep** those promises.

Correct: Although the **politician** makes many promises, **he** rarely **keeps** them. (*They cannot signify **politician** because **politician** is singular and **they** is plural.*)

3. Pronouns are used to avoid awkward or repetitious use of nouns.

Example: *Awkward:* I knew **Chris** was out because **Chris** left a note.
Better: I knew **Chris** was out because **he** left a note.

4. The only time **it's** has an apostrophe is when it is a contraction for **it is** or **it has**.

Examples: It's been a cold morning.
The thermometer reached its highest reading.

5. Don't put yourself first! It is good manners to put the other person before you.

Examples: This is for you and me.
My wife and I are going swimming.

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PRONOUN CASES

Like nouns, pronouns change form (referred to as **inflection**) depending on the number of people, places, or things being referred to. Unlike most nouns, however, they also have inflections for case, for person (1st, 2nd, 3rd), gender, and by their position and function in the sentence.

There are three pronoun cases: **Nominative**, **Objective**, and **Possessive**.

NOMINATIVE CASE

Used when the pronoun refers to the subject or subject complement of the sentence.

	Singular	Plural
1st person	I	we
2nd person	you	you, who
3rd person	he (<i>masculine</i>) she (<i>feminine</i>) it (<i>neutral</i>)	they

Examples: *Subject:* **I** baked the cake as best as **I** could.
Subject complement: It was **I** who baked the cake.

OBJECTIVE CASE

Used when the pronoun refers to the direct or indirect object or the object of the preposition.

	Singular	Plural
1st person	me	us
2nd person	you	you, whom
3rd person	him (<i>masculine</i>) her (<i>feminine</i>) it (<i>neutral</i>)	them

Examples: *Direct object:* The bakers tasted the cake and congratulated **him**.
Indirect object: The bakers gave **him** a medal.
Object of the preposition: After celebrating his cake, the bakers brought the contestant into the private lounge with **them**.

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POSSESSIVE CASE

Used instead of a possessive adjective and a noun.

	Singular	Plural
1st person	my, mine	our, ours, whose
2nd person	your, yours	your, yours
3rd person	his (<i>masculine</i>) her, hers (<i>feminine</i>) its (<i>neutral</i>)	their, theirs

Examples: The cake is **hers**.
The recipe that the baker used is **mine**.

OTHER TYPES OF PRONOUNS

REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS

Reflexive pronouns refer to the same thing as another noun or pronoun in the sentence, generally the subject of the sentence.

Common Reflexive Pronouns

myself	yourself	himself
herself	itself	oneself
ourselves	yourselves	themselves

Example: The contestant congratulated **herself** when she won the baking contest.

Note: There are no such words as **hisself** and **theirselves**.

INTENSIVE PRONOUNS

Intensive pronouns are like reflexive pronouns, but they emphasize the noun or pronoun they follow, rather than referring to another noun or pronoun. The difference is mostly where they are in the sentence.

Example: I, **myself**, will never look at grandma's old cake recipe the same again.

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Notes:

- **Intensive** and **reflexive** pronouns can never be a subject or part of a compound subject.
- Do not use a reflexive pronoun as a direct object or object of a preposition when there is no other noun or pronoun in the sentence to which it refers.

Example: *Incorrect:* Bill went to the game with Pete and **myself**.

Correct: Bill went to the game with Pete and **me**. (***myself** cannot be the object of the preposition **with**.*)

VAGUE PRONOUNS

Sometimes, sentences contain pronouns without antecedents. These are called **vague pronouns** and should be replaced by nouns or proper nouns.

Example: *Vague:* Down the street, **they** play baseball every Friday. (*Who is **they**? We don't know!*)

Better: Down the street, **schoolchildren** play baseball every Friday.

When multiple nouns are present, it can be unclear which noun is the antecedent.

Example: *Vague:* The **children** are in separate **rooms**; they are clean. (*Which is the intended antecedent: **children** or **rooms**?*)

Better: The children are in separate, clean rooms.

Better: The clean children are in separate rooms.

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

Possessive pronouns signify antecedents in ownership of something in a sentence.

Example: **Eugenie** forgot **her** notebook today. (*The pronoun **her** signifies the antecedent, **Eugenie**, and also shows her ownership of the notebook.*)

Examples: **Novak** drove **his** car to work.

The **dog** shed **its** fur.

Her company gave **her** an award.

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DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS

Demonstrative pronouns point out a specific person(s) or thing(s). There are four demonstrative pronouns:

- **this**
- **these**
- **that**
- **those**

Note: **This** and **these** typically refer to people or items close at hand. **That** and **those** refer to things farther away.

Examples: Please hold **this**.
Those are the best.

Demonstrative pronouns can also be used as adjectives:

Examples: Is anyone using **this** spoon?
I'm going to throw away **these** magazines.

THE PRONOUNS *WHO* AND *WHOM*

Who is used to signify a person in a sentence, and is attached to a verb.

Example: The **professor, who** was so kind to his students, extended the deadline.

While **who** can be singular or plural, the attached verb must agree with the number of the antecedent.

Examples: *Incorrect:* The **students, who was** fond of **their** professor, gave **him** an apple. (*The verb **was** is singular, while the antecedent, **students**, is plural.*)

Correct: The **students, who were** fond of **their** professor, gave **him** an apple.

Note: In the example above, notice how we can use many pronouns in one sentence, as long as the antecedents are clear.

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WHO VERSUS WHOM

Many English speakers and writers are unsure of when to use **who** or **whom**. The rule is that **whom** signifies an antecedent that is the direct object or indirect object in a sentence, or the object of a preposition.

Example: Chris threw **the ball** to **Brian**.

Brian, the indirect object, receives the direct object, the ball, from Chris.

To refer to Brian in this sentence, use **whom**:

Example: To **whom** did Chris throw the ball?

To signify Chris, use **who**, since he is the subject:

Example: **Who** threw the ball to Brian?

MORE PRONOUN RULES

1. In formal writing use a singular pronoun (**his**, **her**, or **its**) to refer to antecedents such as **person, man, woman, one, any, anyone, someone, somebody, each, every, everyone, everybody, either, neither, none**.

Examples: **Anyone** can submit **his** [or] **her** poem to the literary magazine.

Each of you in Mr. Anderson's science class should turn in **his** [or] **her** project.

Historically, **he, him, or his** has been used to refer to such antecedents as **one, none, or everybody**, and similar indefinite pronouns that could be female or male. Today, it is acceptable and preferable to use **he or she, him or her, and his or her** when the reference is general.

Example: *Generic:* A careful **writer** will revise **his** sentences.

Revised: A careful **writer** will revise **his or her** sentences.

To avoid overuse of **his or her**, reword the sentence or use a plural antecedent and pronoun.

Example: Careful **writers** revise **their** sentences.

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Informal English frequently uses a plural pronoun to refer to antecedents such as **any, every** (and their compounds), **each, someone, somebody, neither, either**, especially when a plural meaning is suggested.

Note: Informal English is generally not used in academic writing.

Examples: *Formal:* **Everybody** held **his** breath during the fireworks.

Informal: **Everybody** held **their** breath during the fireworks.

Formal: He said that **each** of us should bring **his/her** own supply of paper.

Informal: He said that **each** of us should bring **our** own supply of paper.

2. When a collective noun (**herd, crowd, people, class, team, army**, etc.) is an antecedent:

- Use a plural pronoun if you are considering the individual members of the group separately.
- Use a singular pronoun if you are considering the group as a single unit.

Examples: *Individual members:* The **band** raised **their** instruments at the conductor's signal.

Individual unit: The instructor was pleased to note the **class** was at **its** best.

3. If two or more antecedents are joined by **and**, use a plural pronoun to refer to them.

Example: **Melissa and Ashley** came to collect **their** prize.

If two or more singular antecedents are joined by **or** or **nor**, use a singular pronoun to refer to them.

Example: I doubt whether **John** or **David** will finish **his** assignment before the bell rings.

If one of two antecedents joined by **or** or **nor** is singular and one plural, make the pronoun agree with the nearest antecedent.

Example: Neither the band leader **nor** the band **members** want to wear **their** new uniforms.

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PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT PRACTICE

Faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement is a problem in each of the following sentences. Identify the pronouns and their antecedents, then make any necessary corrections for agreement and clarity.

1. The questions that are most often asked today concern our basic lifestyles, and the faculty does not seem to be answering it.
2. One of the men could not find their shoe.
3. Generally, a person likes to vary their diet.
4. Only a freshman or a sophomore is entitled to cast their vote at the meeting.
5. Either the watchman or the policeman must stay on the phone to keep in contact with their headquarters.
6. Neither the city nor the suburbs are capable of handling its problems.
7. The new jazz trio at Elm Street is playing their own music.
8. Because of the storm, the fleet of shrimp boats were forced to run for the nearest harbor, where they found safety.
9. A person should be willing to defend their own principles.
10. Every American should be free to live wherever they can afford.