

Subject-Pronoun Agreement Writing Commons (2012)

As a student embarking on your academic career, most papers that you will be asked to write will be academic papers. These academic papers include clear and direct language with a purpose to communicate to your readers your intended message. Clear and direct language should be used to avoid any confusion. Readers do not want to have to play guessing games with your paper to figure out your main points and arguments, and readers should not have to work hard to figure out what you mean. While much of the success of a well-written essay has to do with having an insightful thesis that is well supported with a cogent synthesis of evidence or sources with appropriate transitions and a logical progression, style and grammar should not be overlooked. Not many people are grammar aficionados, but effective writers still consider themselves to be knowledgeable of the rules and conventions of grammar. Not everyone is as great at identifying grammatical errors as he or she may think, but being aware of the rules and conventions of grammar inevitably improves the clarity of papers. Not only that, but the “grammar check” function on some word processors does not catch all grammatical problems, especially pronoun-antecedent agreement issues. Case in point, a word processor may not mark the following sentence as an error: *If an engineering student fails the midterm, they have to receive an A on the final for a passing grade.* The pronoun and antecedent in the sentence do not agree. Let’s take a closer look.

Careful proofreading of this sentence reveals that “an engineering student” is singular; therefore, the pronoun *they* should be replaced with *he* or *she* in the above sentence. To help identify pronoun-antecedent agreement, we first should define what a pronoun is. Simply put, pronouns are words that replace nouns. Rather than using the same nouns over and over again (which can become cumbersome), pronouns allow for a more interesting and concise paper as long as pronouns and antecedents agree in person, number, and gender. What is an *antecedent*? Good question! An antecedent is the word to which a pronoun refers. Both the pronoun and the antecedent need to be either singular or plural. In other words, the pronoun and antecedent need to agree—either both are plural or both are singular. There can be no disagreement between them. It sounds more confusing than it really is.

To clarify, if we take a look at this sentence again, but this time with a pronoun and antecedent that agree—*If an engineering student fails the midterm, he or she has to receive an A on the final for a passing grade*—we see that the “engineering student” is the antecedent of the pronoun *he* or *she*, in which both pronoun and antecedent agree with one another because they are both singular. Also keep in mind that the verb that follows the pronoun or pronouns must also agree (he or she *has* to receive and A on the final for a passing grade)—but that’s another grammar rule about which you can learn in “[Subject-Verb Agreement](#).”

Pronouns and Antecedents Must Agree in Number

Singular: The teacher began her lesson. (The antecedent of the pronoun *her* is “teacher.” Both *her* and “teacher” are singular, and so the pronoun and antecedent agree in number.)

Plural: The teachers began their lessons. (The antecedent of the pronoun *their* is “teachers.” Both *their* and “teachers” are plural, and so the pronoun and antecedent agree in number.)

Pronouns and Antecedents Must Agree in Gender

In addition to making sure that pronouns and their antecedents agree in number, you should ensure that the pronouns and their antecedents agree in gender as well.

Incorrect: Uncle Henry traveled overseas to buy vases for her collection.

Correct: Uncle Henry traveled overseas to buy vases for his collection.

Since Uncle Henry is not a woman, the pronoun *her* is not in agreement with the antecedent. Therefore, the *her* must be changed to *his*.

You may be asking, *how do you approach pronouns that are not gendered, such as the gender-neutral pronoun “it”?* For example: *When Joey set it on the counter, the glass fell over.* This example might be a little bit trickier as the sentence construction begins with a subordinate adverbial clause, “When Joey set it on the counter,” and so we might wonder, *where is the antecedent that comes before (and refers to) the pronoun “it”?* If the sentence were constructed this way—*the glass fell over when Joey set it on the counter*—then we could easily see that the pronoun *it* refers to the antecedent *glass*. Whether the sentence is a simple construction or is more complex (for instance, beginning with a dependent clause), the *glass* is what was set on the counter and what fell over. We can see that the gender-neutral pronoun *it* and the antecedent *glass* agree.

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Things begin to get more complex when we're dealing with indefinite pronouns, which are pronouns that do not refer to a specific thing or person. *Anybody, everybody, everything, somebody, no one*, etc., all seem to be plural, but they actually are singular. However, there are also plural indefinite pronouns like *some* and *both*.

Incorrect: Everybody should bring their books to class next week.

Correct: Everybody should bring his or her books to class next week.

The first sentence is incorrect because *everybody* really equates to *every person*, which is singular; thus, the indefinite pronoun *everybody* requires a singular pronoun, or pronouns to be gender sensitive. For more about indefinite pronouns and subject-pronoun agreement, listen to Grammar Girl's podcast (linked below).



Collective Nouns

Examples of collective nouns include words such as *team, jury, audience, and class*. These collective nouns typically refer to a class or group. Identifying collective nouns as singular or plural can be tricky as the singularity or plurality depends on how the collective noun functions. An antecedent can either refer to the pronoun as a single unit or the different parts of the whole. For example: *The finance committee will present its findings tomorrow at the Marshall Center*. This sentence shows the committee being treated as a single unit/group. On the other hand, *The finance committee could not agree on their findings* reflects the idea that the committee is made up of *members* (plural) who, in this case, are not presenting findings as a collective unit/group. This why you will see the term *audience* (used frequently throughout this textbook) with either plural or singular pronouns following or preceding it: the sentence can either be reflecting the collectivity of the group (*the audience*—singular) or the individuality of its members (*the audience [members]*—plural).

As parts/individuals of the whole: The audience fixed their attention on the presenter.

Single Unit: The audience fixed its attention on the presenter.

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Compound Antecedents

Compound antecedents are joined by the conjunction *and* and require pronouns to be plural. For example: *My dad and his older brother are going to their family reunion next week.* (Both are going to their family reunion.)

However, when the word *each* or *every* appear before a compound antecedent, the pronoun needs to be singular. For example: *Every athlete or musician has his or her own method of training.* (Consider that *each* or *every* means each *individual* athlete or each *individual* musician has his or her own method of training. Or, every *single* athlete or every *single* musician has his or her method of training.)

There will be times when *and* will not be used to join a compound antecedent; rather, *nor* or *or* will be used. When this occurs, the pronoun must agree in number with the closest antecedent. For example: *Neither Joseph nor his brothers got their job application in on time.* Because *brothers* is a plural noun and is the antecedent that is closest to the pronoun *nor*, the pronoun that follows their needs to be plural as well. If the compound antecedents were reversed in this sentence, we the sentence would (correctly) be structured like this: *Neither Joseph's brothers nor Joseph got his application in on time.* *Joseph* (a singular noun) is the antecedent that is closest to the pronoun *nor*, so the pronoun that follows (*his*) needs to be singular as well. For more about the correct usage of “neither/nor,” listen to the Grammar Girl podcast (linked below).



There are a couple of additional things to keep in mind when checking for issues with pronoun references. Indefinite pronouns like *everyone* or *somebody* could be either male or female, but many writers assume the pronoun to be masculine, which excludes females. Readers may consider this position to be sexist, so you'll want to consider your audience when you're deciding on pronoun use when indefinite pronouns function as antecedents. Also, keep in mind that ambiguous pronoun usage, which occurs when a pronoun can have more than one antecedent, confuses readers. For example: *Christopher visited Andrew after his graduation.* Here, we are unsure of who his is referring to: Whose graduation was it—Christopher's graduation or Andrew's graduation? In such an instance, it's necessary to restructure the sentence (*After his graduation, Christopher visited Andrew*) for the sake of clarity, because repeating the noun would make the sentence awkward (*Christopher visited Andrew after Christopher's graduation*).

Pronoun-antecedent disagreement is an easy mistake to make, but fortunately, it is quite easy to remedy. Remember that spell check and grammar check functions in your word processor probably will not catch all the errors in a paper. Only by identifying the grammatical mistakes that you have a tendency to make and then carefully proofreading with those issues in mind will you ensure a polished final product.

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