

Sentence Development Tutorial

Tutorial 5:

Pronoun Agreement

Checking for Agreement in Number

Checking for Agreement with Indefinite Pronoun Antecedents

Checking for Agreement in Person

Avoiding Gender Bias in Pronoun Agreement

Checking for a Clear Antecedent

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (5a_Pronoun_Agreement_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (5b_Pronoun_Agreement_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

Pronoun Agreement

This tutorial will demonstrate strategies for:

1. **checking for agreement in number**
2. **checking for agreement with indefinite pronoun antecedents**
3. **checking for agreement in person**
4. **avoiding gender bias in pronoun agreement**
5. ***checking for a clear antecedent.***

As you do this tutorial and learn about pronoun agreement, try to think about the kinds of pronoun agreement errors that your classroom instructor may have pointed out in your writing. If you know what types of errors to look for in your own essays, you will be able to proofread more effectively.

Part One: Checking for Pronoun Agreement in Number

Consider the following paragraphs:

Paragraph #1

As Ivana and Norman worked that day, side by side in Norman's office, Ivana told Norman about Ivana's trip to Lake Tahoe where Ivana had deposited several quarters into a slot machine. With the last of the quarters, Ivana had won a big jackpot on the last day of Ivana's vacation. Norman wondered if Norman could repeat Ivana's success by also winning at the slot machines.

Paragraph #2

As they worked that day, side by side in his office, Ivana told Norman about her trip to Lake Tahoe where she had deposited several quarters. With the last of them, Ivana had won a big jackpot on the last day of her vacation. Norman wondered if he could repeat her success by also winning at the slot machines.

How are Paragraph #1 and Paragraph #2 different?

Both paragraphs present the same information clearly, but as you may have noticed, Paragraph #1 seems more boring, annoying, and wordy than Paragraph #2 because there is more repetition than there is in the second paragraph. Since Paragraph #2 uses pronouns, it is more concise and less repetitive than the first paragraph.

5. Pronoun Agreement

In Paragraph #2, the writer has used the pronouns *they*, *her*, *she* and *he*. Most often, pronouns take the place of nouns or noun phrases. Pronouns either precede or follow their **antecedents**, specific nouns that the pronouns represent or refer to.

Review Paragraph #2 in the following chart carefully, so you can see how pronouns and their antecedents should agree. In Paragraph #2, each pronoun has been bracketed, and the antecedents have been underlined.

Paragraph #2

As [they] worked that day, side by side in [his] office, Ivana told Norman about [her] trip to Lake Tahoe where [she] had deposited several quarters. With the last of [them], Ivana had won a big jackpot on the last day of [her] vacation. Norman wondered if [he] could repeat [her] success by also winning at the slot machines.

Paragraph #2: Pronouns and Their Antecedents	
Pronoun	Antecedent
<i>they</i>	Ivana and Norman (Notice that <i>they</i> <u>precedes</u> its antecedents.)
<i>his</i>	Norman (Notice that <i>his</i> <u>precedes</u> its antecedent.)
<i>her</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>her</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>she</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>she</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>them</i>	quarters (Notice that <i>them</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>her</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>her</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>he</i>	Norman (Notice that <i>he</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)
<i>her</i>	Ivana (Notice that <i>her</i> <u>follows</u> its antecedent.)

As you can see in the chart above, when there is more than one antecedent or a plural antecedent, the pronoun is also plural (Ivana and Norman/*they*, quarters/*them*). And when the antecedent is singular, the pronoun is also singular (*her*/Ivana, *she*/Ivana, *his*/Norman, and *he*/Norman). This is called **pronoun agreement**. Sometimes writers make errors in pronoun agreement when they forget to make a pronoun agree with its antecedent.

5. Pronoun Agreement

Below is a chart that lists all the singular third-person pronouns and all the plural, third-person pronouns. When you proofread for correct pronoun agreement, it may be helpful to refer to this chart.

Singular, Third-Person Pronouns	Plural, Third-Person Pronouns
<i>she</i>	<i>they</i>
<i>her</i>	<i>them</i>
<i>he</i>	<i>their</i>
<i>him</i>	
<i>his</i>	
<i>it</i>	
<i>its</i>	

Principle I. Pronouns and their antecedents must agree in number.

Be sure to use a **singular pronoun** if the pronoun takes the place of a singular noun, that is, if the pronoun has a **singular antecedent**, as shown in the following sentence:

singular noun

During the party, the cat licked [its] paws and smoothed [its] fur.

In the sentence above, the singular pronoun, **its**, has the singular antecedent, “cat.” The pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent.

Be sure to use a **plural pronoun** if the pronoun takes the place of a plural noun, that is, if the pronoun has a **plural antecedent**:

plural noun

During the final exam, the students wrote [their] essays quickly.

In the sentence above, the plural pronoun, [their] has a plural antecedent, “students.” The pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent.

Students often make errors in pronoun agreement when they use plural third-person pronouns for singular antecedents, as shown below:

singular noun

plural pronoun

A student may not understand [their] homework.

Using Principle I, you can correct this sentence:

singular noun

singular pronouns

A student may not understand [his or her] homework.

In this corrected version, you can see that the singular pronouns, [his or her] have the singular antecedent, “a student.” The pronouns now agree in number with their antecedent. Please note that [his or her] is used because this sentence is referring to students in general and students can be either female or male.

Please open your 5b exercises file and complete **Exercise 1**.

Part Two: Checking for Agreement with Indefinite Pronoun Antecedents

Sometimes, a pronoun's antecedent is not a noun, but a special kind of pronoun called an **indefinite pronoun**. Following is a chart that lists the indefinite pronouns.

Indefinite Pronouns		
everybody	somebody	one
nobody	anyone	either
everyone	anybody	neither
no one	another	
someone	each	

One of the most common pronoun agreement errors occurs when the antecedent is an **indefinite pronoun** such as *each* or *anyone*, as shown in the following sentences:

Incorrect: Each of the women in the Garcia family has [their] own car.

Correct: Each of the women in the Garcia family has [her] own car.

Incorrect: Anyone who wants to attend the next concert must buy [their] ticket now.

Correct: Anyone who wants to attend the next concert must buy [his or her] ticket now.

Even though indefinite pronouns refer to more than one person, they are considered grammatically singular antecedents and require singular pronouns, as shown above (*her/each*, *his* or *her/anyone*).

Principle II: When an indefinite pronoun is the antecedent, you should always use a singular pronoun.

Please open your 5b exercises file and complete **Exercise 2**.

Part Three: Checking for Agreement in Person

Pronouns can be divided into groups:

	Singular	Plural
First person	I, me, my	we, us, our
Second person	you, your	you, your
Third person	she, her, hers (feminine.) he, him, his (masculine) one it/its (neutral)	they/them/their

If you are writing in the first person (I), it is important not to confuse your reader by switching to the second person (*you*) or third person (*he, she, they, it*). Similarly, if you are using the second person, don't switch to first or third person.

Incorrect: Every student must pull all-nighters regularly if [**you**] want to excel in college.

Since “student” and “you” don't refer to the same “person,” readers can become confused. Below are three corrected versions of the same sentence:

Correct: **You** must pull all-nighters regularly if [**you**] want to excel in college.

or

Every student must pull all-nighters regularly if [**he or she**] wants to excel in college.

or

Students must pull all-nighters regularly if [**they**] want to excel in college.

Principle III. A pronoun should agree in person with its antecedent.

Please open your 5b exercises file and complete Exercise 3.

Part Four: Avoiding Gender Bias in Pronoun Agreement

Consider the following sentence:

Incorrect: When a doctor is with [his] patient, [he] must try to make [his] patients feel comfortable.

Because there is no singular, non-gender specific pronoun in English, in the past, writers used to write sentences like the previous one. However, people, now know that the automatic use of [he] is not accurate because it excludes women. As you can see, the pronouns [he] and [his] in the previous sentence suggest that all doctors are men when, in fact, many doctors are women. Not only is this inaccurate, but it is also sexist. Automatically using the masculine pronouns creates gender bias.

- One solution to avoid gender bias is to use **both** the masculine and feminine singular pronouns:

Correct (Option 1): When a doctor is with [**his or her**] patients, [**he or she**] must try to make [**his or her**] patient feel comfortable.

But this option can become too awkward and wordy, especially if it is used too often in a short piece of writing.

- Another option, if it makes sense in the context of your writing, is to make the **noun antecedent plural** and make the plural pronoun agree with it.

Correct (Option 2): When doctors are with [their] patients, [**they**] must try to make [**their**] patients feel comfortable.

- A third option is to **avoid overusing pronouns** whenever possible:

Correct (Option 3): When doctors are working, it is important to try to make patients feel comfortable.

It is very important to note that a pronoun can also convey gender bias against men, as shown in the following sentence:

Incorrect: When a nurse is with [her] patient, [she] must try to make [her] patients feel comfortable.

Correct (Option 1): When a nurse is with [**his or her**] patients, [**he or she**] must try to make [**his or her**] patient feel comfortable.

Correct (Option 2): When nurses are with [their] patients, [**they**] must try to make [**their**] patients feel comfortable.

Correct (Option 3): When nurses are working, it is important to try to make patients feel comfortable.

Principle IV. **Whenever necessary, avoid gender bias by using both masculine and feminine singular pronouns with a singular antecedent; by using an antecedent and plural pronouns; or by eliminating pronouns, if possible.**

Please open your 5b exercises file and complete Exercise 4.

Part Five: Checking for a Clear Antecedent

Besides agreeing in number and person with its antecedent, a pronoun must refer clearly to a **specific noun** so that it is not vague or ambiguous. Consider the following sentence:

Even though the Lexus hit the fire hydrant, [it] was not damaged.

In this sentence, we do not know if [it] refers to the Lexus or the fire hydrant. That is, the antecedent is ambiguous. The writer can make the antecedent clear by correcting the sentence in one of the following ways:

Correct: Even though the Lexus hit the fire hydrant, the car was not damaged.

Correct: Even though the Lexus hit the fire hydrant, the hydrant was not damaged.

Here is a second example of an unclear antecedent:

Yuki told her professor that [she] had made an error in class.

In this sentence, we do not know if [she] refers to Yuki or the professor. Once again, the antecedent is unclear. The writer can correct the sentence by using quotation marks that identify the words that Yuki is saying. This can be done in one of the following ways:

Correct: Yuki told her professor, “[I] made an error in your class.”

Correct: Yuki told her professor, “[You] made an error in your class.”

The next sentence provides yet another example of an unclear antecedent:

Conservative adults don’t think that [they] should play obscene rap lyrics on the radio.

In this sentence, we do not know to whom “they” refers. There is no possible antecedent in this sentence. The sentence can be corrected in the following ways:

Correct: Conservative adults don’t think disc jockeys should play obscene rap lyrics on the radio.

Correct: Conservative adults don’t think hip-hop stations should play obscene rap lyrics on the radio.

Principle V. A pronoun must clearly refer to a specific antecedent. If there is no clear antecedent, you should replace the pronoun with a noun or rewrite the sentence so that the pronoun has only one possible antecedent.

Please open your 5b exercises file and complete Exercises 5 and 6.

Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and be prepared to review your pronoun agreement errors. Are there any similarities in your errors? Knowing what to look for during proofreading can make it easier to find your pronoun agreement errors
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.