GRAMMAR

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Basic Rules
- A pronoun takes the place of a specific noun.
- Examples of pronouns include I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, us, them, hers, his, who, whom, whose, which etc.
- The original noun which the pronoun replaces is called the antecedent.
- Pronouns must have clear antecedents.
- Pronouns help with the flow of one’s writing by pointing to something or someone (the original noun or antecedent) already mentioned or named.
- Pronouns make writing concise by eliminating the need to repeat the antecedent.
  Note: Sometimes it is necessary to repeat the antecedent to make the meaning clear.
- Like nouns, pronouns function as subjects or objects in sentences.
- Pronouns change form according to
  - whether they are feminine or masculine.
  - whether they are singular or plural.
  - how they function in the sentence (subject, object, or possessive).

THE PRONOUN AND ITS ANTECEDENT MUST AGREE IN GENDER, NUMBER AND FORM/CASE

Agreement in Gender
- If the antecedent is feminine, the pronoun must be feminine; if the antecedent is masculine, the pronoun must be masculine.
  e.g., When Natasha met Boris, she gave him a gift.

Agreement in Number
- If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular; if the antecedent is plural, the pronoun must be plural.
  e.g., Harry wanted to see the movie, but he stayed home instead.
  Harry: masculine, singular; he: masculine, singular.

  e.g., A student must study hard if she or he wants to succeed. > Correct
  student: singular, gender unknown; she or he: singular, feminine or masculine.
  A student must study hard if they want to succeed. > Incorrect
  student: singular they: plural
  The pronoun, they, does not agree in number with the antecedent, student.
Students try to shy away from gendered language by using they to refer to a singular antecedent. This is incorrect. **Do not use they** to refer to a singular antecedent.

- **How to avoid gendered language**
  - Alternate between he and she.
  - Choose the most appropriate singular pronoun.
  - Use he or she; him or her; she and he; or her and him.
    
    e.g., In this class, everyone moves at their own pace. > **Incorrect**  
    In this class, everyone moves at his and her own pace. > **Correct**  
    Every runner must train rigorously if they want to excel. > **Incorrect**  
    Every runner must train rigorously if she or he wants to excel. > **Correct**  
  - Change the antecedent to a plural noun.
    
    e.g., In this class, the students move at their own pace. > **Correct**  
    Runners must train rigorously if they want to excel. > **Correct**  
    Students must study hard if they want to succeed. > **Correct**

**Agreement in Form/Case**
- The **form/case** of the pronoun must reflect how it functions in the sentence.
- If the pronoun acts as the **subject** it takes the **nominative form/case**.
- If the pronoun acts as the **object**, it takes the **objective form/case**.
- If the pronoun reflects **ownership**, it takes the **possessive form/case**.

**PRONOUN FORMS AND CASES**

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<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
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<tr>
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<td>I</td>
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<td>My, mine</td>
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<td>You</td>
<td>You</td>
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<td>She, he, it</td>
<td>Her, him, it</td>
<td>Hers, his, its</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
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<td>Us</td>
<td>Our, ours</td>
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<td>You</td>
<td>You</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>Them</td>
<td>Their, theirs</td>
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</table>
Nominative forms: I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they
- Use the nominative form if the pronoun functions as the subject of the sentence or clause.
- Use the nominative form when the pronoun follows a to be verb.
  e.g., John always thinks before he speaks. (John=subject: nominative form, he)
  He and I went shopping. (He and I = subject: nominative form)
The Nobel Prize winner was she. (nominative form follows is, a to be verb)

Objective forms: me, you, him, her, it, us, you, them
- Use the objective form if the pronoun is a direct or indirect object.
  e.g., The doctor spoke with my husband and me. (object: objective form, me)
  When Boris met Natasha, he gave her a gift. (object: objective form, her)
  A neighbor helped us. (object: objective form, us)

Possessive forms: my, mine, your, yours, his, her, hers, its, our, ours, your, yours, their, theirs
- Use the possessive form to indicate ownership.
  e.g., The workers forgot their lunches.
    Jane needed a calculator to do her homework.
    During the storm, the house lost its roof tiles.

NOTE:
Do not confuse its, the possessive form of it, with it’s, the contraction for it is (See “Plurals and Possessives” handout).
Do not confuse their, the possessive form of they, with there, which indicates direction.

AVOID AMBIGUOUS AND IMPLIED ANTECEDENTS

- Clarify ambiguous references by revising the sentence. Often a pronoun does not provide enough clarity, especially if two or three subjects are involved.
  e.g., Abbott told Costello that he won the prize.
    This is ambiguous: he can refer to either man. To clarify, rewrite the sentence by inserting a name or using a direct quote.
  e.g., Abbott told Costello that he, Abbott, won the prize.
  Abbott told Costello, “I won the prize.”

- The antecedent cannot be implied: the antecedent must be present.
  e.g., As an MSU student, it struck me that there is not enough parking on campus.
    >Incorrect: It cannot refer to student, so there is no antecedent for it.
    As an MSU student, I am struck by the fact that there is not enough parking on campus.> Correct: I refers to student.
• **Make sure the pronoun refers to specific people or items.**
  *It, this,* and *that* should not be used to refer to a broad idea or an entire preceding sentence. Instead, use a noun or phrase to express the broad idea.

**MORE TRICKY SITUATIONS**

**Collective nouns as antecedents**

- **Any group that functions as a unit,** such as committee, jury, crowd, corporation, is singular; use the singular pronoun, *it.*
  
  e.g., The jury reached *its* decision. > **Correct**
  The jury reached their decision. > **Incorrect**
  The committee published *its* agenda for the upcoming retreat. > **Correct**
  The committee published *their* agenda for the upcoming retreat. > **Incorrect**
  Xenia Corp. made a billion in profits last year. *It* increased profits by 25% over last Year. > **Correct**
  Xenia Corp. made a billion in profits last year. *They* increased profits by 25% over last year. > **Incorrect**

**Comparisons: than, as**

- **Use the correct form/case of pronoun when comparing persons or items.**
  
  e.g., Jack is taller than *I* [am]. > **Correct**
  Jack is taller than *me* [am]. > **Incorrect**
  We valued no other employee more than *we valued* [her]. > **Correct**
  We valued no other employee member better than *we valued* [she]. > **Incorrect**
  o **How to troubleshoot:** In your mind, fill in the rest of the sentence to double check the form of the pronoun.
  
  e.g., She cooks better than he [cooks].  *Not:* She cooks better than him [cooks].
  I am a better cook than she [is].  *Not:* I am a better cook than her [is].

**Compound antecedents**

- **If there are two nouns, one singular and the other plural, in an either-or situation, the pronoun agrees with the noun nearer to it in the sentence.**
  
  e.g., Neither the squirrel nor the *birds* found *their* way to the bin of seed.

**NOTE:** *Computer grammar checks do not indicate ambiguous or incorrect pronoun references.*