

Bracken Business Communications Clinic

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.
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 - **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

	Nominative Form	Objective Form	Possessive Form
Singular	I	Me	My, mine
	You	You	Your, yours
	She, he, it	Her, him, it	Hers, his, its
Plural	We	Us	Our, ours
	You	You	Your, yours
	They	Them	Their, theirs

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
- **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.*

