

Pronoun Agreement, Reference, and Case

A Grammar Help Handout created by Abbie Potter Henry

Pronouns take the place of nouns. Since there are thousands of nouns and only a few pronouns, these little words have a very big job. Our job as writers is to make sure that the pronouns we use match in number and person the nouns they are replacing (**Pronoun Agreement**), that our reader can always tell exactly what nouns we are replacing (**Pronoun Reference**), and that we use the right form of the pronoun to represent its role in the sentence (**Pronoun Case**). The antecedent is the noun or nouns that the pronoun is replacing. In the examples that follow, the *antecedents* are in italics, and the pronouns are underlined.

Pronoun Agreement, number: Nouns are singular and plural, and the pronouns that replace them must also be singular or plural to match. This sounds easy enough, but there are several situations* that can make this a little more complicated. For instance, two nouns joined by “and” are considered plural and will be replaced by a plural pronoun such as “they.” However, if the same two nouns are joined by “or,” the pronoun must only agree with the noun that is closest to it.

Example: *Bob* and *John* will take their wives to dinner tonight.
 Either *Bob* or *John* will take his wife to dinner tonight.

Following is an example of a common pronoun agreement error.

Example: If a *student* wants to succeed, they must work hard. (“They” is plural trying to replace “*student*” which is singular.)

Example corrected: If a *student* wants to succeed, he or she must work hard.
 If *students* want to succeed, they must work hard.

**The rules for pronoun agreement in number are the same as those for subject-verb agreement, so please refer to the subject-verb agreement handout for more information about difficult situations with pronoun agreement.*

Pronoun Agreement, person: In the world of writing, we have three “persons”: The writer (1st Person), the reader (2nd Person), and the people, places, things, and ideas that make up the world (3rd Person). If the writer begins in 1st person or 3rd person, he or she should not switch to 2nd person in mid-thought. Remember, anytime you use a form of the pronoun “you,” you are putting your reader in your essay.

Example: I love going to the beach because the sound of the ocean helps you relax.
 (Incorrect) (How do you know your reader can relax?)

Example corrected: I love going to the beach because the sound of the ocean helps me relax.

Pronoun Reference: Because a pronoun can replace thousands of nouns, writers must be very certain that the reader can tell exactly what noun is being replaced. Sometimes the antecedent (noun being replaced) is not clear, and sometimes it is not present at all.

Example: *Bob* told *John* that his wife was getting fat. (Whose wife is getting fat? The use of “his” is not clear because “his” could be referring to *Bob* or to *John*.)

Example corrected: *John*’s wife is getting fat, and he told Bob.

Example: I hate doing my taxes because every year they take out more money. (Who is “they”?)

Example corrected: I hate doing my taxes because every year the *IRS* takes out more money.

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Pronoun Case: Unlike nouns, pronouns change their form based upon what function they play in a sentence. For example, consider these sentences: She loves dogs. Dogs love her. In the first sentence, the pronoun “she” is used because it is the subject of the verb “loves” (Subjective Case). In the second sentence, the pronoun “her” is used because it is not the subject of any verb, which means it is an object (Objective Case). If the pronoun in both sentences is changed to a noun such as “Jane,” the noun will remain the same in both sentences. Other forms of pronoun case include the Possessive Case and the Reflexive/Intensive Case. Following is a chart that shows the four forms (cases) pronouns take.

| Subjective Case | Objective Case | Possessive Case | Reflexive/Intensive Case |
|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| I | Me | My, Mine | Myself |
| You | You | Your, Yours | Yourself, Yourselves |
| He | Him | His | Himself |
| She | Her | Her, Hers | Herself |
| It | It | Its | Itself |
| We | Us | Our, Ours | Ourselves |
| They | Them | Their, Theirs | Themselves |
| Who | Whom | Whose | |

Subjective Case: These pronouns are the ones that are used whenever the pronoun is the subject of a verb.

Compound Subjects: When creating a compound subject, writers sometimes make the following mistake: “Me and John want a cookie.” This is an error because “me” is an objective pronoun and cannot “want” anything. Stylistically, the subjective pronoun “I” should always be the last subject in a compound subject construction, so rather than writing “I and John want a cookie, the sentence should read “John and I want a cookie.”

Comparisons: When comparing two things, writers can sometimes imply the second thing that is being compared, but if that involves a pronoun, then the writer must follow through with the thought in his or her own mind to determine if the pronoun is the subject of a verb. For example, “John is smarter than I am.” This sentence could also be correctly written as follows: “John is smarter than I.” However, to write “John is smarter than me” is incorrect because “me” cannot be the subject of the verb “am” even when the verb is implied and not stated.

Objective Case: These are the pronouns that are used whenever the pronoun is the direct or indirect object of a verb or the object in a phrase.

Compound Objects: Writers are not likely to make the following error: “My mother sent I to the store,” but they might write “My mother sent John and I to the store.” The second sentence is as incorrect as the first because “I” can only work as the subject of a verb, and the subject of the verb in the example sentences is “mother.” Therefore, “My mother sent John and me to the store” is correct.

Comparisons: Sometimes comparisons involve objects rather than subjects, and the writer must make sure to use the objective case if a pronoun is one of the objects. For example, “My mother likes my brother more than me” means that of the two siblings, the brother is liked more than the writer. In contrast, “My mother likes my brother more than I” means that the mother likes the brother more than the writer likes the brother.

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Possessive Case: The biggest error writers make with the possessive case is confusing contractions with possessive pronouns. For example, the contraction “it’s” means “it is” whereas the pronoun “its” is the possessive case of “it.” Thus, the cat licks its paw because it’s (it is) sore. Another common error is with their and they’re. “They’re” is the contraction for “they are.” Thus, the children love their cat, and they’re (they are) always arguing over who gets to pet her.

Reflexive/Intensive Case: These pronouns are used only to reflect or intensify the action of the subject of a clause. For example, “*John* went to the store by himself,” or “*John* himself created this problem.” The biggest mistake writers make with these words is using a non-standard or incorrect form of the words such as “hissself,” “theirsself,” or “theirselves.” The words in the chart on page one are the only correct forms of these words.

Practice Exercises

Below are sets of sentences. In each set, one sentence uses pronouns correctly and the other contains either a pronoun agreement, reference, or case error. Choose the correct sentence, and then check your answers using the key that is upside down at the bottom of the page.

1. A. Everyone who goes to college should look for scholarships to help them with tuition.
B. Students who go to college should look for scholarships to help them with tuition.
2. A. Lions are my favorite animal because they are beautiful, fierce, and loyal to their pride.
B. The lion is my favorite animal because they are beautiful, fierce, and loyal to their pride.
3. A. A person should always be kind because you never know what someone else is going through
B. You should always be kind because you never know what someone else is going through.
4. A. The government makes me so mad because they can’t seem to get anything done.
B. The government makes me so mad because it can’t seem to get anything done.
5. A. Sarah and her sister spent all afternoon in the emergency room because she had a sore throat.
B. Sarah had a sore throat, so she and her sister spent all afternoon in the emergency room.
6. A. People say that time heals all wounds, but I am not sure that I believe them.
B. They say that time heals all wounds, but I am not sure that I believe them.
7. A. My best friend said that Bob and I should get to know each other.
B. My best friend said that me and Bob should get to know each other.
8. A. My mother scolded me and my brother for always fighting in the car.
B. My mother scolded my brother and I for always fighting in the car.
9. A. I sent me a reminder on my cell phone so I would not forget tomorrow’s quiz.
B. I sent myself a reminder on my cell phone so I would not forget tomorrow’s quiz.
10. A. The families should work things out for themselves.
B. The families should work things out for theirselves.
11. A. This question is hard because of it’s syntax.
B. This question is hard because of its syntax.
12. A. After the children finish playing, they are supposed to pick up their toys.
B. After the children finish playing, they are supposed to pick up they’re toys.

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|------------|
| 12. A |
| 11. B |
| 10. A |
| 9. B |
| 8. A |
| 7. A |
| 6. A |
| 5. B |
| 4. B |
| 3. B |
| 2. A |
| 1. B |
| Answer Key |