Pronoun Agreement & Reference

Abridged from Learner English

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents, which is the noun to which pronouns refer. Singular pronouns are used with singular antecedents, and plural pronouns are used with plural antecedents.

Examples:
Yes: Professor Jones finished his lecture. (Singular antecedent, singular pronoun.)
Yes: The students wrote feverishly on their essays. (Plural antecedent, plural pronoun.)

Compound Antecedents

Compound antecedents are nouns joined by conjunctions. Use plural pronouns with compound antecedents joined by “and”.

Examples:
Yes: Anna and Justin wrote feverishly on their essays. (Plural antecedent, plural pronoun.)
Yes: The faculty and the students gave their opening remarks. (Plural antecedent, plural pronoun.)

With compound antecedents joined by “or,” “either…or,” “nor,” “neither…nor,” use pronouns that agree with the nearest antecedent.

Examples:
Yes: Michael or Jason should receive an award for his speech. (Nearest singular compound antecedent, singular pronoun.)
Yes: Neither Justin nor his classmates could finish their mid-terms in time. (Nearest plural compound antecedent, plural pronoun.)
**Indefinite Pronouns**

Sometimes antecedents may themselves be pronouns. Use singular pronouns to refer to these singular indefinite pronouns, i.e. pronouns that refer to nonspecific people or things.

- “One” Words: one, anyone, everyone, no one, someone
- “Body” Words: anybody, everybody, nobody, somebody
- “Thing” Words: everything, something
- Other Words: any, each, either, neither, none

**Examples:**

No: When *someone* has been drinking, they are likely to drive recklessly. (Singular antecedent, plural pronoun.)

Yes: When *someone* has been drinking, he or she is likely to drive recklessly. (Singular antecedent, singular pronoun.)

Yes: When *drivers* have been drinking, they are likely to drive recklessly. (Plural antecedent, plural pronoun.)

**Generic and Collective Nouns**

A generic noun is one that refers to the typical member of a group. Use a singular pronoun with generic noun antecedents. A collective noun refers to a group that functions as a unit and not as an individual. Use a singular pronoun with collective nouns.

**Examples:**

No: Every *student* must study daily if *they* want to excel. (Singular generic noun antecedent, plural pronoun.)

Yes: Every *student* must study daily if *he* or *she* wants to excel. (Singular generic noun antecedent, singular pronoun.)

Yes: *Students* must study daily if *they* want to excel. (Plural non-generic antecedent, plural pronoun.)

No: The *Academic Excellence Committee* granted *their* permission to bestow the award. (Singular collective noun antecedent, plural pronoun.)

Yes: The *Academic Excellence Committee* granted *its* permission to bestow the award. (Singular collective noun antecedent, plural pronoun.)

Yes: The *Academic Excellence Committee’s members* granted *their* permission to bestow the award. (Plural antecedent, plural pronoun.)