EVERETT
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Writing Center

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 <u>someone</u> has been drinking, they are likely to drive recklessly. (Singular <u>antecedent</u>, plural **pronoun**.)

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

Yes: When <u>drivers</u> have been drinking, they are likely to drive recklessly. (Plural <u>antecedent</u>, 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 <u>student</u> must study daily if **they** want to excel. (Singular generic noun <u>antecedent</u>, plural **pronoun**.)

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

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

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

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

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