

Pronoun Agreement

Pronouns are substitutes for nouns. A pronoun must agree in number and person with the noun (the person, place, or thing) to which it refers.

*Professor Smith noted, in **her** lecture, that balloons float when **they** are inflated with helium.*

Because Professor Smith is one person and a woman, we use the singular feminine pronoun **her**. Because the word balloons is plural, it requires the plural **they** or **their**.

Singular pronouns

I	it	anyone	everybody	Either
me	itself	anything	somebody	neither
myself	who	anybody	someone	no one
you	this	everything	something	nobody
yourself	one	everyone	each	nothing

Plural pronouns

they	these, those	We
them	yourselves	Us
themselves	both	Ourselves

Avoiding Gender Bias in Pronoun Use

In the past, a common approach to pronoun use was to use a third-person pronoun – that is, writing **he** or **him** or, more recently, **he or she**, or **him or her** – to refer to a single person. For example:

*A research candidate in our department must demonstrate **his or her** mastery of statistics. **He or she** will be expected to pass a test.*

However, many people consider the use of binary gender designations (i.e., language that assumes a person is either male or female) not inclusive. Therefore, we recommend that if you are writing about a particular person, make an effort to learn the person's gender, if possible, and use an appropriate pronoun. If you don't know the person's gender, or if you are not writing about a particular person and want to avoid assigning gender to the subject of your writing, try one of these options:

1. Make the antecedent (the original noun) and its pronoun plural. For example:
*Research candidates in our department must demonstrate **their** mastery of statistics by passing a test.*
2. Rewrite the sentence to avoid using a pronoun altogether. For example:
A passing mark on a statistics test is required of all research candidates.
3. Use the singular **they**. Although this pronoun is, strictly speaking, grammatically incorrect because it uses a plural pronoun to refer to a singular noun, the singular **they** is gaining widespread acceptance as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. For example:
*A **research candidate** in our department must demonstrate **their** mastery of statistics by passing a test.*

The singular **they** is already commonly used in speech and in informal writing; it is also accepted by a number of organizations – for example, the American Psychological Association and the Government of Canada – as a practical response to evolving social norms. We strongly recommend that students ask their professors about the use of the singular **they**, to clarify their purpose in using it and avoid losing marks over perceived grammatical errors.

This [APA blog post](#) discusses gender and pronouns in more detail.

Another useful article on the same topic is located on [the Government of Canada Translation Bureau website](#).

Confusing and Vague Use of Pronouns

Pronouns can cause confusion when the noun to which they refer is unclear. For example:

*Smith compares artists Georgia O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, but **she** is quite unique.*

The reader cannot be certain whether **she** refers to O’Keeffe or Kahlo. The sentence should be rewritten in this way:

Smith compares artists Georgia O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, but Kahlo is quite unique.

Another example:

*We found errors in the completed experiments and **they** were noted.*

It’s not clear whether **they** refers to the **errors** or **experiments**. The sentence should be rewritten in one of these ways:

In the experiments completed, we found and noted errors.

We noted errors in the completed experiments.

While confusing pronouns refer to a number of possible nouns in a sentence, vague pronouns are not linked to any specific noun. For example, the pronouns **it** or **this** can be vague, especially when referring to a whole group of words indicating an idea. For example:

*During the War of 1812, many American leaders believed there would be little difficulty in taking over Canada. President Jefferson, for example, assumed **it** was simply a matter of harnessing the loyalty of U.S. immigrants living in Canada.*

*During the War of 1812, many American leaders believed there would be little difficulty in taking over Canada. President Jefferson, for example, assumed **this** was simply a matter of harnessing the loyalty of U.S. immigrants living in Canada.*

The pronouns **it** and **this** do not replace a specific noun in the preceding sentences. Instead, **it** does not refer to a specific noun, and **this** attempts to replace the whole idea that American leaders believed taking over Canada would be easy. The vague use of **it** and **this** might be corrected in this way, respectively:

*During the War of 1812, many American leaders believed there would be little difficulty in taking over Canada. President Jefferson assumed **this conquest** was simply a matter of harnessing the loyalty of U.S. immigrants living in Canada.*

*During the War of 1812, many American leaders believed there would be little difficulty in taking over Canada. President Jefferson, for example, assumed that **such an appropriation** was simply a matter of harnessing the loyalty of U.S. immigrants living in Canada.*

A useful tip to remember is that **this** should rarely appear on its own; placing a noun after **this** (as in **this idea** or **this event**) will ensure that **this** refers to a specific noun that is easy for the reader to identify.