

Pronouns

Pronouns—words such as *it*, *he*, *they*, *we*, *anyone*, and *she*—are substitutes for nouns. They play an important role in the clarity and style of a piece of writing.

Pronoun Agreement

In response to evolving social norms, pronoun “rules” have expanded to offer writers more inclusive options. In this resource, we explain those options. We recommend that students check in with their professors if there is any question of which options are preferred for particular assignments. SASS also supports writers’ agency to break grammar rules for a variety of rhetorical purposes (emphasis, clarity, elegance, etc.), but it is important for writers to understand the rules before choosing to break them.

With the exception of the gender-neutral singular “they”, a pronoun should **agree in number and person** with the noun (the person, place, or thing) to which it refers. For example:

*Professor Boaler notes, in **her** essay, that “mathematics is a conceptual domain.” **Her** ideas are well-received in some academic circles, but **they** have also met with resistance.*

Because *Professor Boaler* is one person and uses she/her pronouns in her online professional biography, we use the singular feminine pronoun **her**. Because the word *ideas* is plural, it requires the plural **they** in this sentence.

Find a pronoun in your writing and check its *antecedent* (the noun it represents, e.g., *Professor Boaler* in the sentence above). Is the antecedent first-person, second-person, or third-person? Is it singular or plural? Then check the pronoun: does it match the antecedent in person and number? Use this chart as a reference:

| | 1st-person | 2nd-person | 3rd-person |
|----------|-------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Singular | I, me, myself | You (singular), yourself | It, itself, he, him, himself, she, her, herself, they, their, themselves |
| Plural | We, us, ourselves | You (plural), yourselves | They, them, themselves |

Note that it’s easy to forget that **the following words are all singular** and should take singular pronouns:

| | | |
|------------|-----------|---------|
| anyone | everybody | either |
| anything | somebody | neither |
| anybody | someone | one |
| everything | something | nobody |
| everyone | each | nothing |

For example:

Would **anyone** like to share **his** solution to the problem?

Would **anyone** like to share **their*** solution to the problem?

*(note the use of the gender-neutral singular “they” for the singular “anyone”)

Neither of the women liked her dessert, so **each** swapped with the other.

Boaler, J. (2020, December 16). [Developing Mathematical Mindsets: The Need to Interact with Numbers Flexibly and Conceptually](#).

Inclusive 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. At SASS, we believe that academic writing should always be as **inclusive** as possible. Therefore, we recommend that, when writing about a particular person, you 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 *they* has until recently been considered a plural pronoun only, the singular *they* has gained widespread acceptance as a gender-neutral singular pronoun; “they” can now be used in both a singular and a plural sense. 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 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.

Confusing or vague use of pronouns

Pronouns can cause confusion when their **antecedents** aren’t clear. An antecedent is the noun to which a pronoun refers. For example:

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

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

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

Another example of an unclear antecedent:

*We found errors in the completed experiments and described **them**.*

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

In the experiments completed, we found and described errors.

We described 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 in reference to a 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.

Make sure the connections between pronouns and their antecedents (the nouns they stand in for) are crystal clear. Inexperienced or rushed writers commonly confuse their readers by placing the antecedent and pronoun **too far apart** in a sentence or paragraph, often with another possible candidate for antecedence in between the real antecedent and the pronoun—for example:

Brandon had been feeling troubled for some time, so he took his dog out for a long walk in the woods. The dog frolicked among the autumn leaves and he felt better.

In this example, it's not clear if Brandon or his dog feels better, because the pronoun "he" is placed so far away from its antecedent "Brandon," and the dog is mentioned between the two.

Instead:

Brandon had been feeling troubled for some time, so he took his dog out for a long walk in the woods. The dog frolicked among the autumn leaves and, watching him, Brandon felt better.

or:

Brandon had been feeling troubled for some time, so he took his dog out for a long walk in the woods. Watching the dog frolic among the autumn leaves made Brandon feel better.

Me or I? Subject and object pronouns

Another form of pronoun misuse occurs when writers mix up their **subject** and **object pronouns**. For example,

The Residence Don spoke kindly to he and I.

One way to informally and quickly check this sort of situation is to remove one of the pronouns and read out loud; many writers will hear that the pronoun is wrong:

The Residence Don spoke kindly to I. (or he) (Wrong!)

vs.

The Residence Don spoke kindly to me. (or him) (Correct!)

However, this informal test isn't reliable. It's better to understand the rules so you will always make good pronoun choices. So, what's going on here? Subjects and objects. **Subjects** are the part of the sentence that do the action, and **objects** receive the action. In the example above, the action (the **verb**) is *spoke*. The subject doing the action is *the Residence Don*. The objects receiving the action (being spoken to) are *him* and *me*.

Here is a helpful, slightly modified, pronoun chart from [Purdue University's OWL \(Online Writing Lab\) resources](#).

| Subject Pronouns | Object Pronouns |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| I | me |
| you | you |
| he, she, it, they* | him, her, it, them* |
| we | us |
| they | them |
| who | whom |

*(see "Inclusive pronoun use" section above)

Choosing the correct pronoun for an antecedent (the noun that the pronoun represents) requires you to know if the antecedent is an **object or subject** (you may want to refer to OWL’s chart above to make sure you’ve got it right). For example:

The manager, unseen on the balcony, gleefully toppled the flowerpot onto the pavement below.

In this sentence, the manager is the **subject** (does the action) and the flowerpot is the **object** (receives the action), so according to the chart above, the appropriate pronoun for the manager is *he* or *she* or *them*, depending on what you know of the person’s gender, and the appropriate pronoun for the flowerpot is *it*. A following sentence, using pronouns, might go like this:

Returning downstairs, she felt a quiet satisfaction at how thoroughly it had smashed.

Me or myself? Reflexive Pronouns

Simply put, reflexive pronouns end in *self* or *selves*, depending on whether they are singular or plural. Here’s a list:

| Singular | Plural |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| myself | ourselves |
| yourself | yourselves |
| himself, herself, themself* | themselves |
| itself | |
| oneself | |

*(see “**Inclusive pronoun use**” section, above)

Inconsistent pronouns

Inexperienced writers may sometimes use an inconsistent point of view within a sentence or paragraph. Be mindful that your pronouns and antecedents are consistent with each other, and with subsequent related pronouns later in the same sentence or later in the same paragraph. For example:

Incorrect: If **one** is a decision-maker, **they** must carefully consider all best options.

Correct: If **one** is a decision-maker, **one** must carefully consider all best options.

Incorrect: Canadian citizens enjoy many civil rights and freedoms. **We** are able to travel and speak freely **they** can even criticize the government without negative repercussions.

Correct: As Canadian citizens, **we** enjoy many civil rights and freedoms. **We** are able to travel and speak freely; **we** can even criticize our government without negative repercussions.

The incorrect examples above leave readers wondering if they’ve missed information somewhere along the way, because it sounds as though the writer is referring to more than one person or group of people (one / they / we / they).

Keeping pronouns consistent will help make your writing easier and more enjoyable to read.