

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

A pronoun replaces a noun.

“Of course,” you say. “I know all about pronouns. They’re everywhere!” And congratulations. You just used a pronoun. You successfully and clearly substituted the word *pronouns* with the pronoun *they*. This substitution is successful because:

- 1) it is clear, and
- 2) it agrees.

But what do I mean when I say that it “agrees”?

In order to understand agreement, you must learn what an *antecedent* is. The word means “preceding” or “prior” (Dictionary.com). In other words, *antecedent* refers to something that comes before. When it comes to pronouns, antecedents are the noun or other nominative form that is being replaced.

Below are two examples. I have underlined the pronoun and bolded the antecedent.

Example 1: **Molly** walked to the train station. She arrived ten minutes early.

Example 2: **Molly’s train** was ten minutes late. When it arrived, Molly boarded.

Pronouns are helpful because they keep writing from becoming repetitive. In the first example above, I would have had to start both sentences with Molly’s name if I had not replaced the second occurrence with a pronoun.

Number

However, when using pronouns, it is imperative that you keep a pronoun’s number in mind. Nouns and pronouns alike can be one of two numbers: **singular** and **plural**. If you are replacing a singular nominative, be sure to use a singular pronoun; if you are replacing a plural nominative, use a plural pronoun.

The most common instance of disagreement between pronouns and antecedents is when the antecedent is a word that sounds plural but is actually singular. Below is an example of what pronoun-antecedent *disagreement*.

Example 3: **Everyone** brought their unicorn to class for show-and-tell.

WRONG!

The word “everyone,” although it may seem as though it refers to a group of people, is actually singular and means “every person.” The sentence should read as in Example 4, below.

Example 4: **Everyone** brought his or her unicorn to class for show-and-tell.

Be similarly careful when replacing words like *everybody*, *no one*, *nobody*, *anyone*, and *anybody*.

Gender

But what is this “his or her” business? Surely it’s less wordy just to say “his” or “her” instead, right?

Well, as well as number, pronouns also have gender. Of course, there are masculine pronouns (he, him, his) and feminine pronouns (she, her). In addition, there are neutral pronouns (we, us, our, they, them, their). When replacing a gender-neutral word, it is important to use a gender-neutral pronoun.

However, you may notice that all the gender-neutral pronouns listed above are plural. There is no singular, gender-neutral personal pronoun in the English language. Most writers choose the wordier “his or her” rather than risk pronoun-antecedent disagreement. However, some professors may prefer that writers just choose either “his” or “her” while composing a paper. If you are worried or have a persnickety professor, ask if he or she has any preferences on the subject.