

Appropriate Pronoun Reference

Introduction

A common mistake in writing, which causes readers to become confused, is the use of inappropriate pronouns to refer to something. As a writer, you need to understand pronoun reference and, when writing, you need to ensure that you use appropriate pronouns.

Reference

Pronouns can be used to refer to:

| | | |
|--|---|----------------------------------|
| Yourself A group which includes you | First person I, my, me we, our, us | Singular Plural |
| The person you are writing for The people you are writing for | Second person you, your you, your | Singular Plural |
| Some other person Some other people | Third person he, him, she, her they, their, them | Singular Plural |
| Some thing Some things | it, its they, their, them | Singular Plural |
| Every single instance in some group | everyone, everybody | Singular |
| The lack of a particular person or thing | no one, nobody, nothing | Singular |
| A particular unspecified person or thing | someone, somebody, something, anyone, each one | Singular |

Agreement

You can see from the section on pronoun reference that pronouns differ in three fundamental ways:

their person
(first, second, third)

their number
(singular or plural)

their gender
(male, female, or neutral)

Normally, pronouns must agree in person, number, and gender with their referent.

Example 1

Programmers need to attend to details or else **your** software is likely to fail. ❌

The word **programmers** is not necessarily referring to the reader nor is it referring to the writer and so any pronoun referring to **programmers** should be third person plural. If you do not know what third person plural refers to go back to the reference section.

Think about how you could repair the sentence.

(**Programmers** need to attend to details or else **their** software is likely to fail. ✅)

Example 2

The teacher spoke to the **boy** and told **her** to go home. ❌

Boy is a singular male noun and refers to neither the writer nor the reader and thus requires third person singular male.

Think about how you could repair the sentence.

(The teacher spoke to the **boy** and told **him** to go home. ✅)

Exceptions

There are exceptions to the rule that pronouns must agree with their referent.

Consider the following examples.

Someone has forgotten to hand in **their** assignment. ✓

Notice that **someone** is singular but that the plural pronoun **their** is appropriate. In situations where the sex of some indefinite referent is unknown it is acceptable to use the plural pronoun. See the lesson on avoiding nondiscriminatory language.

The dance troupe is changing **its** name to "Tango". ✓

The dance troupe is making a quick change into **their** costumes. ✓

Notice that in the first sentence the singular pronoun **its** is used while in the second sentence the plural **their** is used. When you are referring to some group as a single unit, as in the first sentence, it is appropriate to use a singular pronoun. However, when you are referring to the individual members of the group, as in the second sentence, it is appropriate to use a plural pronoun.

Appropriate Pronoun Reference Quiz

In each of the following sentences, a pronoun has been used incorrectly. Replace the pronoun with the one that shows appropriate reference.

Bicyclists are required to wear helmets to decrease your risk of head injury.

The boy watched the group members practise for its concert.

The horse that we liked the best nodded their head.

As the boys rowed across the lake, the wind blew it off course.

Nobody should leave the room without putting his books away.

Answers

Bicyclists are required to wear helmets to decrease **their** risk of head injury.
(You need the third person possessive pronoun "their".)

The boy watched the group members practise for **their** concert.
(You need a pronoun that refers to "group members".)

The horse that we liked the best nodded **its** head.
(The pronoun refers to "the horse".)

As the boys rowed across the lake, the wind blew **them** off course.
(The pronoun refers to "the boys".)

Nobody should leave the room without putting **their** books away.
(When the sex of some indefinite referent is unknown you should use the plural pronoun.)