



Understanding Pronoun Agreement

How to avoid offending grammarians, feminists, and
stylists

What is a pronoun?

- A **pronoun** replaces nouns or other pronouns in a sentence so that you do not have to repeat them. In the following sentences, *his* and *they* are pronouns that replace *Yoda* and *warriors*.


Yoda uses **his** lightsaber.


Yoda trains many **warriors**, and **they** become masters.

- The noun or pronoun that a pronoun replaces is called the **antecedent**. In the previous sentences, *Yoda* and *warriors* are the antecedents of *his* and *they*.

What is pronoun agreement?

- Pronoun agreement has quite a simple concept:

A pronoun agrees with its antecedent in person, number, and gender.

Agreement in Person

Avoid needless shifting in person, which means shifting in point of view, such as from *I* to *you*.

I was watching *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. You could tell that there were a lot of computer graphics.

Change to

I was watching *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. I could tell that there were a lot of computer graphics.

Agreement in Number

Most problems with pronoun-antecedent agreement involve number. The principles are simple: If the antecedent (the word the pronoun refers back to) is singular, use a singular pronoun. If the antecedent is plural, use a plural pronoun.



Luke forgot **his** droid.



Many **pilots** flew **their** planes.



Someone lost **his or her** [not **their**] lightsaber.

Agreement in Gender

- The pronoun should agree with its antecedent in gender, if the gender of the antecedent is specific.
- Masculine and feminine pronouns are gender-specific: he, him, she, her.
- Others are neuter: I, we, me, us, it, they, them, who, whom, that, which.

To avoid sounding sexually biased, you can use **he** or **she** or **his** or **her** instead of just **he** or **his**; however, many writers simply make antecedents and pronouns plural.

Everyone will bring **his** or **her** droid to the command center.



Pilots should bring **their** droids to the meeting.



Pronoun Agreement Trouble Spots

Understanding the main trouble spots with pronoun agreement can help writers immensely.

1. Indefinite Pronouns
2. Collective Nouns
3. Compound Antecedents
4. Alternative Antecedents
5. Ambiguous Pronoun Reference

Indefinite Pronouns

Most indefinite pronouns take a singular antecedent.

Indefinite Pronouns

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

- **Everyone** received **his or her** training manual.
- **Each** of the boys had **his** own podracer.

Indefinite Pronouns: Plural

A plural indefinite pronoun, like *few* and *both*, as an antecedent takes a plural pronoun.

- **Both** Anakin and Padme knew **their** wedding had to be a secret.

Certain indefinite pronouns do not clearly express either a singular or plural number. With pronouns like *all*, *any*, *none*, and *some*, agreement is determined by what these pronouns are referring to.

- Some of the **fruit** was left in **its** bowl.

- Some of the **fruits** were left in **their** bowls.

Indefinite Pronoun: Singular

The words *each*, *every*, and *many a(n)* before a noun make the noun singular.

- **Each** child and adult was **his or her** own authority.
- **Each** and **every** person doubted **himself or herself**.
- **Many a** person is capable of knowing **himself or herself**.

Collective Nouns

Most of the time, collective nouns take a **singular antecedent** because the **collective noun** acts as **one unit**.

Collective Nouns

team company council class
corporation government committee family
group audience jury crowd

- The **team** that was ahead in the playoffs lost **its** home game.
- The **Writing Center** changed **its** policy on lab usage.

Collective Nouns continued

Collective nouns take a plural pronoun only when the members of the group are acting individually, not as a unit.

- The **class** picked up **their** class rings this morning.

(The members of the class pick up their rings individually.)

- The **team** are putting on **their** uniforms. (Each team member is getting dressed separately.)

Compound Antecedents

Two or more antecedents, singular or plural, take a plural pronoun. These are also known as compound antecedents. Such antecedents are usually joined by *and* or by commas and *and*.

- **Howard and his parents** bought **their** presents early.
- **Students, instructors, and the administration** pooled **their** ideas at the forum.

Alternative Antecedents

Alternative antecedents—that is, antecedents joined by *or*, *nor*, *whether/ or*, *either/ or*, *neither/ nor*, *not only/ but also*—require a pronoun that agrees with the nearer antecedent.

- Neither Sam nor his **friends** lost **their** way.

- Neither his friends nor **Sam** lost **his** way.

- Juana or **Phil** will bring **his** book to class.

Ambiguous Pronoun Reference

Some sentences can be confusing when they have more than one possible antecedent for the pronoun, or when there is no clear antecedent. We call this confusion ambiguous pronoun reference.

Unclear: Darth Vader told Luke Skywalker that he was his father.

(Who was whose father?)

Unclear: Anakin refused to obey the Jedi Order, which angered Yoda.

(Was Yoda angered by the Jedi Order or by the fact that Anakin refused to obey it?)

Ambiguous Pronoun Reference Correction

How to Fix Ambiguous Pronoun Reference

1. Replace an ambiguous pronoun with a noun.

Critics

~~They~~ say that *Star Wars: Episode 1* was the worst movie in the series .

2. Change reported speech to quoted speech.

"I am your father."

Darth Vader told Luke Skywalker, ~~that he was his father~~.

3. Rephrase the sentence.

Anakin's refusal to obey the Jedi Order

Anakin ~~refused to obey the Jedi Order, which~~ enraged Yoda.

4. Add a noun after the words *this* or *that*.

display of power

Luke used the Force to make C3PO float across the room. [^]This caused the Ewoks to release their captives.

Ambiguous Pronoun Reference Practice

Can you fix these sentences?

Unclear: Anakin gave a necklace to Padme that was as beautiful as she was.

(Was Padme as beautiful as *she* was?)

Clear: Anakin gave Padme a necklace that was as beautiful as she was.

Unclear: It states in the article that *Star Wars* is one of the most successful series.

(What is *it*?)

Clear: The article states that *Star Wars* is one of the most successful series.

Unclear: Anakin complemented Padme's beauty, but she initially refused his advances.

(*She* obviously refers to Padme and not her beauty, but there is no direct mention of Padme.)

Clear: Anakin complemented Padme's beauty, but Padme initially refused his advances.

Unclear: Obi-Wan Kenobi saw Anakin walking with his wife.

(Was it Obi-Wan Kenobi's wife or Anakin's?)

Clear: Obi-Wan Kenobi saw Anakin walking with Padme, Anakin's wife.

Let's Practice!

- At the heart of it all, faulty use of pronoun agreement can offend a number of people: grammarians, feminists, and stylists.
- Complete the activities in the pronoun agreement DLA, and remember the trouble spots in pronoun agreement.