

Agreement of Pronoun and Antecedent

A pronoun usually refers to a noun or another pronoun that comes before it. The word that a pronoun refers to is called its *antecedent*.

5s. A pronoun should agree in number and gender with its antecedent.

(1) A pronoun that refers to a singular antecedent is singular in number.

EXAMPLES Daniel Defoe wrote **his** first book at the age of fifty-nine.
The **elephant** is a long-lived animal. **It** grows **its** tusks at maturity.

(2) A pronoun that refers to a plural antecedent is plural in number.

EXAMPLES Reliable **cars** make **their** owners happy.
We walk **our** dogs daily.

A few singular pronouns have forms that indicate the gender of the antecedent. Masculine pronouns refer to males; feminine pronouns refer to females. Neuter pronouns refer to places, things, ideas, and, often, to animals.

Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
he	she	it
him	her	it
his	hers	its
himself	herself	itself

Often, when the antecedent of a personal pronoun is another kind of pronoun, a word in a phrase following the antecedent will help to determine gender.

EXAMPLES **One** of the **women** designs **her** own costumes.
Each of the **boys** rode **his** bicycle to school.
Neither of the **kittens** has opened **its** eyes yet.

Reference Note

For a further discussion of **antecedents**, see page 52.

SKILLS FOCUS

Demonstrate understanding of correct pronoun and antecedent agreement. Use pronouns that agree in number and gender with singular antecedents. Use pronouns that agree with plural antecedents.

Think as a Reader/Writer

In many cases you can avoid the awkward *his* or *her* construction by rephrasing the sentence and using the plural form of the pronoun or by substituting an article (*a*, *an*, or *the*).

EXAMPLES

The **passengers** will be shown where **they** can check in.

A **person** should choose **a** college carefully.

Think as a Reader/Writer

In informal conversation, plural personal pronouns are often used to refer to singular antecedents that can be either masculine or feminine. Such usage is becoming increasingly common in writing and may someday become acceptable as standard written English. For now, however, avoid such usage in formal writing and speaking.

INFORMAL

Everybody has packed their lunch in an insulated cooler.

FORMAL

Everybody has packed **his or her** lunch in an insulated cooler.

When a singular antecedent may be either masculine or feminine, use both the masculine and the feminine forms, connected by *or*.

EXAMPLES Each passenger will be shown where **he or she** can check in.

A **person** should choose **his or her** college carefully.

If you talk on the phone with **someone** you don't know well, speak clearly to **him or her**.

5t. Some indefinite pronouns are singular, and some are plural. Other indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural, depending on their meaning in a sentence.

(1) Use a singular pronoun to refer to *anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, somebody, someone, or something*.

EXAMPLES **Either** of the girls can bring **her** CD player.

Neither of the workmen forgot **his** tool belt.

Did **each** of the mares recognize **her** own foal?

Someone left **his or her** hat on the field.

One of the parakeets escaped from **its** cage.

NOTE Sometimes the meaning of *everyone* or *everybody* is clearly plural. In informal situations, the plural pronoun should be used.

CONFUSING Everyone laughed when he or she saw the clowns.

INFORMAL **Everybody** laughed when **they** saw the clowns.

In formal situations, it is best to revise the sentence so that it is both clear and grammatically correct.

FORMAL The **audience** laughed when **they** saw the clowns.

(2) Use a plural pronoun to refer to *both, few, many, and several*.

EXAMPLES **Both** of the sisters recited **their** lines.

Few of the animals willingly leave **their** natural habitat.

Many of the volunteers shared **their** coats with the flood victims.

Several of the audience were late getting to **their** seats.

(3) The indefinite pronouns *all, any, more, most, none, and some* may be singular or plural, depending on their meaning in a sentence.

EXAMPLES **All** of the water has melted; **it** is pooling in the valley.
All of the streams are full; **they** are rushing torrents.
Most of her cooking tastes good. In fact, **it** is delicious.
Most of the dishes she cooks taste good. **They** contain unusual spices.

5u. Use a singular pronoun to refer to two or more singular antecedents joined by *or* or *nor*.

EXAMPLES Neither **Richard nor Bob** distinguished **himself** in the finals.
Paula or Janet will present **her** views on the subject.

5v. Use a plural pronoun to refer to two or more antecedents joined by *and*.

EXAMPLES **Mona and Janet** left early because **they** had to be home before ten o'clock.
Mom and Dad celebrated **their** twentieth wedding anniversary yesterday.

5w. The number of a relative pronoun (such as *who, which, or that*) is determined by its antecedent.

EXAMPLES Aretha is one **friend who** always keeps **her** word. [*Who refers to the singular noun **friend**. Therefore, the singular form **her** is used to agree with **who**.*]
Many who volunteer **their** time find **their** experiences rewarding. [*Who refers to the plural pronoun **Many**. Therefore, the plural form **their** is used to agree with **who**.*]

Review E Identifying Antecedents and Writing Pronouns

Each of the sentences on the following page contains a blank where a pronoun should be. Complete each sentence by inserting at least one pronoun that agrees with its antecedent. Identify the antecedent.

EXAMPLE 1. Carmen and Tina said that ____ thought my idea was sensible.
 1. *they—Carmen and Tina*

Think as a Reader/Writer

Sentences like those shown under Rule 5u can sound awkward if the antecedents are of different genders. If a sentence sounds awkward, revise it to avoid the problem.

AWKWARD

Ben or Maya will read his or her report.

REVISED

Ben will read **his** report, or **Maya** will read **hers**.

Reference Note

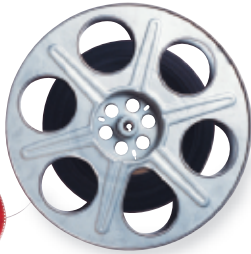
For more information on **relative pronouns in adjective clauses**, see page 147.

SKILLS FOCUS

Demonstrate understanding of correct pronoun and antecedent agreement. Use pronouns that agree in number and gender with singular antecedents. Use pronouns that agree with plural antecedents.

HELP

Some sentences in Review F may contain more than one error in agreement.



1. Please give me Ronald's address so that I can send ____ a letter.
2. The uniform company finally sent Jerome and Ken the shirts that ____ had ordered.
3. Claire or Ida will go to the nursing home early so that ____ can help the residents into the lounge.
4. Several of the volunteers contributed ____ own money to buy the shelter a new van.
5. Did each of the contestants answer ____ questions correctly?
6. Both of the girls packed ____ suitcases carefully for the trip to Canada and Alaska.
7. Every car at the service center had ____ oil changed.
8. Neither of the women withdrew ____ job application.
9. Anyone can belong to the International Students Association if ____ is interested.
10. Neither the coaches nor the players blamed ____ for the loss.

Review F Proofreading Sentences for Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Many of the following sentences contain errors in agreement between pronouns and their antecedents. Identify each of these errors, and give the form of the pronoun that agrees with its antecedent. If a sentence is already correct, write *C*.

EXAMPLE 1. All of us need to choose a topic for his or her reports.

1. *his or her—our*

1. George has chosen Walt Disney as the subject of his report.
2. Several others in our class have also submitted his or her topics.
3. Dominic, one of the Perrone twins, has chosen Alfred Hitchcock as their subject.
4. Neither George nor Dominic will have difficulty finding material for their report.
5. Each of these moviemakers has left their mark on the world.
6. Either Minnie or Sue offered their help with proofreading.
7. Each of the boys refused politely, saying that they would proofread the report on their own.
8. Does everyone, including George and Dominic, know that they must assemble facts, not opinions?
9. Neither George nor Dominic should forget to include amusing anecdotes about their subject.
10. Nobody likes to discover that they just read a dull report about an interesting subject.

5x. A collective noun is singular when it refers to the group as a unit and plural when it refers to the individual members of the group.

EXAMPLES The **pride** of lions is hunting **its** prey on the savanna. [*Pride is thought of as a unit.*]
The **pride** of lions are licking **their** chops in anticipation. [*Pride is thought of as separate individuals.*]

NOTE Sometimes the number of a collective noun depends on the meaning the writer intends.

EXAMPLES The swim **team** proudly displayed **their** trophies. [*The members of the team displayed individual trophies.*]
The swim **team** proudly displayed **its** trophy. [*The team as a whole displayed a shared trophy.*]

5y. An expression of an amount (a measurement, a percentage, or a fraction, for example) may be singular or plural, depending on how it is used.

A word or phrase stating an amount is singular when the amount is thought of as a unit.

EXAMPLES **Ten minutes** isn't long; **it** will go by quickly.
Here is **five dollars**. Is **it** enough?

Sometimes, however, the amount is thought of as individual pieces or parts. If so, a plural verb is used.

EXAMPLES **Ten** of the twenty minutes were wasted; we spent **them** arguing.
Five dollars were counterfeit, weren't **they**?

A fraction or a percentage is singular when it refers to a singular word and plural when it refers to a plural word.

EXAMPLES **One third** of the total is yours. Would you like **it** in ones?
One third of the birds have left. Are **they** migrating?

5z. Singular pronouns are used to refer to some nouns that are plural in form.

EXAMPLES Aunt Jean rarely watches the **news** because she finds **it** depressing.

Reference Note

For information on **subject-verb agreement** with **collective nouns**, see page 175. For a list of **collective nouns**, see page 51.

SKILLS FOCUS

Demonstrate understanding of correct pronoun and antecedent agreement. Use pronouns that agree in number and gender with singular antecedents. Use pronouns that agree with plural antecedents.

The **United States** celebrated **its** bicentennial in 1976.

After Chad finished reading ***Mules and Men***, he wrote a report on **it**.

Future Farmers of America meets tomorrow to plan **its** convention.

Marble Falls is in Texas; **it** is north of San Antonio and Blanco.

NOTE Plural pronouns are used to refer to some nouns that end in *-s* but that refer to a single item.

EXAMPLES I'll buy these **pants** because **they** fit better and are a better value than **those**.

If you're looking for the **scissors**, you'll find **them** in the third drawer on the left.

Review G Agreement of Pronoun and Antecedent

Some of the following sentences contain errors in pronoun-antecedent agreement. Identify each incorrect pronoun, and give the pronoun that agrees with its antecedent. If a sentence is already correct, write *C*.

EXAMPLE 1. Several people in the neighborhood have expressed his or her views.

1. *his or her—their*

1. The school finally sent Michael and Kathryn the results of the tests he or she had taken.
2. On the Serengeti Plain, a cheetah enjoys its freedom.
3. After World War II, the United States gave most of their foreign aid to help Europe rebuild.
4. Five percent of the profit will be donated, won't they?
5. The U.S. Olympic team won their third gold medal.
6. A person with a health problem should always select the best doctor for their needs.
7. During *ferragosto*, or August holiday, the Italian Parliament takes its recess.
8. Each of the mimes gave their impression of a chimney sweep.
9. I like the way the pants look; also, at that price, it's a great bargain.
10. *War and Peace* are the most famous of Leo Tolstoy's works.