

# Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

A. A **pronoun** substitutes for a noun. It refers to a person, place, thing, feeling or quality but not by name.



Example: The **girl** has grown too old for **her** toys. ("Her toys" instead of "the girl's toys")

B. An **antecedent** is a noun that a pronoun replaces.

"This chart identifies the personal pronouns and their roles in a sentence. Subjunctive pronouns act as subjects (I ate lunch). Possessive pronouns go before nouns to show ownership (her hat), and objective pronouns act as objects of a verb (The bee stung me).

Singular				Plural			
person	Subjective	Possessive	Objective	person	Subjective	Possessive	Objective
1st	I	my	me	1st	we	our	us
2nd	you	your	your	2na	you	your	your
3rd	he/she/ it	his/her/ its	him/her/ its	3rd	they	their	them

C. Reflexive pronouns include myself, ourselves, yourself, himself, herself, itself, and themselves. These pronouns are only used in referring to the subject.

Example: **We** decided to find out for **ourselves** whether or not the old mansion was haunted.  
My **brother** didn't realize that he was only hurting **himself** in the process.

\*NOTE: There are no such words as theirselves, theirself, or hissel in Standard English.

D. Just as the subject and verb of a sentence must agree (or correspond), **pronouns** and **antecedents** must also **agree** in three ways: 1) person, 2) number, and 3) gender.

1. **Person:** *Both* the pronoun and antecedent need to be in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

Incorrect: If **people** want to learn yoga, **you** should dedicate at least an hour a day.  
(3<sup>rd</sup> person) (2<sup>nd</sup> person)

Correct: If **people** want to learn yoga, **they** should dedicate at least an hour a day.  
(3<sup>rd</sup> person)

**OR**

If **you** want to learn yoga, **you** should dedicate at least an hour a day.  
(2<sup>nd</sup> person)

2. **Number:** *Both* the pronoun and antecedent need to be either singular or plural.

Incorrect: **Everybody** will want to go, but **they** won't want to pay so much money.  
(singular) (plural)

Correct: **Everybody** will want to go, but **he or she** won't want to pay so much money.  
(singular)

**OR**

Many **people** will want to go, but **they** won't want to pay so much money.  
(plural)

3. **Gender: Both** the pronoun and antecedent need to be either masculine or feminine.  
Incorrect: Since my **father** is watching *Miami Vice*, **she** is too distracted to discuss politics.  
(masculine) (feminine)

Correct: Since my **father** is watching *Miami Vice*, **he** won't be available for an hour.  
(masculine) (masculine)

**OR**

Since my **sister** is watching *Miami Vice*, **she** won't be available for an hour.  
(feminine) (feminine)

## **PROBLEMS TO AVOID**

**Avoid pronoun ambiguity.** Sometimes we use pronouns which have no clear antecedent. In other words, the pronoun could be referring to either of two possible antecedents, and this can confuse the reader.

**Consider this sentence:** *Ann told her friend that her cat sheds too much hair.*

Is Ann talking about getting rid of her own cat or her friend's cat?? The two underlined pronouns do not have a clear antecedent (Ann or her friend). The meaning of the sentence (and what we think about Ann's manners!) depends on *clear* pronoun reference.

The sentence is clear if written like this: *Ann said to her friend, "My cat sheds too much hair."*

Avoid sexist language. The practice of using the terms "man" and "he" when referring to both men and women is outdated and considered sexist by many people. Writers should avoid making judgments of gender when making general statements:

*A doctor should listen to **his** patients.* (sexist)

*A doctor should listen to **his or her** patients.* (not sexist)

Sometimes, overusing "his or her" and "he or she" can make writing awkward. It is usually better to try to use a plural antecedent instead of a singular one.

*Doctors should listen to their patients.*

This sentence does not use sexist language and avoids the use of "his or her."

## **Other Helpful Pronoun Rules**

1. The antecedent is generally never found in a prepositional phrase.

**Each** of the students read **his/her** paper aloud.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

2. When the antecedent is a subject joined **either-or** or **neither-nor**, use the subject closest to the verb to determine the correct pronoun.

Either Don or **his brothers** will have **their** notes from the class.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Neither the children nor **Mary** has **her** answers ready.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

3. When the antecedent is a compound subject (two nouns joined by a coordinating conjunction, such as and, but, yet,) use a plural pronoun.

**Jane and Tom** own **their** own home.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Both the **cat and dog** have eaten **their** food.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

When the compound antecedent is joined by or and both antecedents are singular, the pronoun is singular.

Either **Bob or Jim** gives **his** speech today.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

When both antecedents are plural, the pronoun is plural.

The **juniors or the seniors** may take **their** tests today.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

4. When one antecedent is singular and the other is plural, the pronoun agrees with its closest antecedent.

Ms. Hill or the **Mitchells** will give **their** presentation.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Either the soldiers or **the general** will be required to submit **his** resignation.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

5. Phrases such as **one of**, **neither of**, **each of**, and **either of** are singular antecedents and take a singular pronoun. (Notice that of actually introduces a prepositional phrase.)

**One** (of the girls) **lost** her keys.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

**Everyone** (of the kittens) had **its** own distinctive cry.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

**Neither** (of the boys) had on **his** coat or hat.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

6. Phrases such as both of and some of generally are plural antecedents and require plural pronouns.

**Some** of the students had lost **their** books.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

**Both** of the boys had **their** heads shaved.  
(antecedent) (pronoun)

7. When the antecedent is a subject joined by **either-or** or **neither-nor**, use the simple subject closest to the verb for agreement.

(Either Don or) his **brothers** will have **their** notes from the class.

(Either his brothers or) Don will have **his** notes from the class.

Phrases such as one of, neither of, each of, and either of require a singular pronoun for agreement.

**One** (of the girls) lost **her** keys.

**Each** (of the classes) had **its** own schedule.

**Neither** (of the men) had worn **his** jacket.

8. Phrases such as both of and some of usually require plural pronouns for agreement.

**Some** of the boys had lost **their** books.

**Both** of the boys had **their** bikes stolen.