

Identifying and Fixing Pronoun Errors

Pronouns are incredibly common in both speech and writing, but they are often sources of confusion for listeners and readers. In writing, there two most common pronoun errors are (1) those concerning agreement and (2) those related to vague references. This post will help you diagnose and correct the first, as well as provide you with some exercises to try on your own.

What is "pronoun agreement"?

Pronoun agreement error occurs when the gender and/or number of a pronoun does not correspond with the gender and/or number of the noun to which it refers. This error occurs most commonly when writers use a plural pronoun (such as "they") to reference a singular, collective noun (such as "the group").

Examples

Incorrect version: "Once the group went to the archives, *they* went to the Capitol."

Correct version: "Once the group went to the archives, *it* went to the Capitol."

Why? "The group," although made from many people, is a singular noun. Therefore, the pronoun in the second clause needs to be singular as well.

Incorrect version: "If a student is having difficulty in school, *they* should ask a teacher for help."

Correct version: "If students are having trouble in school, *they* should as a teacher for help."

Why? "A student" is singular, but in the second clause "they" is plural. The pronouns need to match in number, so "student" must be made plural. Alternatively, "they" could be made singular.

Practice

Correct the pronoun agreement errors in agreement. There may be multiple ways to correct each sentence.

1. The audience laughed riotously at the play. Afterwards, they could not stop taking about the talented cast.
2. As a member of a secret society, they are expected to be trustworthy
3. Everyone went to the meeting and were impressed by the presentation.

Answer Key:

1. The members of the audience laughed riotously at the play. Afterwards, they could not stop talking about the talented cast.

OR

The audience laughed riotously at the play. Afterwards, it could not stop talking about the talented cast.

2. As a member of a secret society, he is expected to be trustworthy.

OR

As members of a secret society, they are expected to be trustworthy.

3. Everyone went to the meeting and was impressed by the presentation.

Tips:

- Ask yourself: What word does the pronoun refer to? Is that word singular or plural? Male or female?
- To avoid choosing between gendered pronouns like "he" and "she," you have make the noun it refers to plural (i.e. "a student" becomes "students.")
- Remember that there are certain words (like each, every, and everyone) that are always singular

What is "vague pronoun reference"?

Because a pronoun takes the place of a noun, writers can be ambiguous about what word a pronoun references. Although the writer knows what "it" or "this" refers to, the reader may not necessarily make the same connection. Vague pronoun reference often occurs when a writer refers more than one concept in a previous clause or sentence and then refers to one concept, but not the other in a later clause or sentence using a pronoun.

Examples

Incorrect version: After baking the cookies and watering the flowers, Mary put *them* on the table.

Correct version: After baking the cookies and watering the flowers, Mary put *the flowers* on the table.

Why? "They" can refer to either the cookies or the flowers. Logically both the cookies and the flowers are objects that can belong on a table, so the writer must distinguish which of the nouns Mary put on the table.

Incorrect version: "The boy and girl bought popcorn for the movie. *It* was very good."

Correct Version: "The boy and girl bought popcorn for the movie. *The popcorn* was very good."

Why? When readers see "it," they do not know whether "it" refers to the popcorn, the movie, the boy, or the girl.

The writer must specify which noun was "good" (in this case, the popcorn).

Practice

Find the mistakes in these sentences and re-write an improved version.

1. Robert has three convertibles and two beach houses. They were quite expensive.
2. After Christina got into a fight with Angel, she went home and cried.
3. Napoleon invaded Russia during the winter. This caused many problems.

Answer Key

There are multiple ways to improve these sentences. Here are a few of the possibilities:

1. Robert has three convertibles and two beach houses. The convertibles were quite expensive.

OR

Robert has three convertibles and two beach houses. The beach houses were quite expensive.

OR

Robert has three convertibles and two beach houses. Both were quite expensive.

2. After Christina got in a fight with Angela, Angela went home and cried.

OR

After Christine got in a fight with Angela, Christina went home and cried

3. Napoleon invaded Russia during winter. The winter weather conditions caused problems.

OR

Napoleon invaded Russia during winter. The strength of the Russian army caused problems.

Tips:

- Always ask what word the pronoun is replacing. Is it clear to the reader?
- If you use the word "this" to describe a concept, is that the most specific you can be? Would it be better if you said "this war" or "this author's point of view"?

