Pronoun Choice

This section will help you:

- understand the many uses of pronouns
- recognize correct pronoun choice
- use pronouns correctly in your own writing

Review of Pronouns

Pronouns are words that refer to or take the place of nouns or other pronouns.

I, me, my, myself, we, us, ourselves, you, your, yourself, yours, he, him, himself, his, she, her, herself, hers, it, its, itself, they, themselves, who, whom, which, that, anyone, no one, what, this, each, everybody, some, many, any, one, someone

Pronouns refer to nouns in these sentences.

*Jan* made an appointment with *her* teacher. (*Her* refers to *Jan.*)

Joe wrecked the *car*, and *it* was towed. (*It* refers to *car.*)

Pronouns replace nouns in the following sentences.

*Barbara* kept *parakeets* in the cage. *She* kept *them* in the cage.

Pronouns must refer clearly to the nouns they replace. The reader will be confused if a pronoun seems to refer to more than one word in the sentence, or if the pronoun doesn’t refer to any specific word.

The girls played softball with the boys and *they* enjoyed the game.

Does *they* refer to the boys, girls, or both?

The girls played softball with the boys and *everyone* enjoyed the game.

Using the pronoun *everyone* makes it clear that both the boys and girls enjoyed the game.

When I went to the library, *they* told me the book had been checked out.

Whom does this pronoun refer to?

When I went to the library, the *librarian* told me the book had been checked out.

The vague pronoun *they* has been replaced by the specific noun, *librarian.*

Guidelines for choosing pronouns correctly.

- Pronouns should agree with the nouns and other pronouns they refer to or replace. If the noun referred to is singular, then the pronoun must also be singular.
  
  *The bee* returned to *its* hive.

  If the noun referred to is plural, then the pronoun must also be plural.
  
  *The bees* returned to *their* hive.

- Pronouns must also agree in gender with the words they replace. Feminine pronouns are used to refer to feminine nouns and pronouns.
  
  *Carol* visited *her* uncle.

  Masculine pronouns refer to masculine nouns and pronouns.
  
  *Carol’s* uncle lost *his* pipe.

- When a pronoun refers to two nouns or pronouns joined by “and” or “both . . . and” the pronouns should be plural.
  
  *Murphy* and *Peters* forgot to lock *their* doors.

  *Both* *Joe* and *Carol* wore *their* new hats.

- Nouns following “each” and “every” require a singular pronoun.
  
  *Each* of the *calculators* had *its* own case.

- When a pronoun refers to singular nouns joined by “or,” “either . . . or,” or “neither . . . nor” the pronoun is singular.
  
  *The store* or *the bank* will not open *its* doors today.

- Some nouns ending in “s” (like “politics”) are plural in form but singular in meaning. They agree with singular pronouns.
  
  *Mathematics* has *its* difficult areas.
Indefinite pronouns are words such as everyone, anyone, someone, no one, each, either, neither, and one. These pronouns require singular pronouns.

Each of the puppets had its own set of strings.

Indefinite pronouns like some, most, any, all, and none may require singular or plural pronouns, depending on whether the indefinite pronoun refers to a singular or plural noun.

Some of the property lost its value.

Some of the farmers lost their lands.

Collective nouns (group, team, crew) appear in singular form. Pronouns referring to collective nouns should be singular or plural, depending on whether the noun refers to its members as a unit or as a collection of individuals.

Singular—The crew chooses its captain each spring.

Plural—The crew returned to their homes for Easter.

Pronoun Case

The form (called the case) of a pronoun may change, depending on the pronoun’s function in the sentence.

Subjective Case—I, we, he, she, they, etc.

The subjective case should be used.

When the pronoun is the subject of the sentence.

He had lunch with Joan.

When the pronoun comes after a form of the verb “to be” (is, was, am)

Joan’s best friends are Steve and I.

Objective Case—me, us, him, her, them, whom, etc.

The subjective case should be used.

When the pronoun is the object of the verb.

Nate should give her the tickets.

When the pronoun is the object of a preposition (at, on, to, etc.).

Jerry came to the party with us.

Possessive Case—my, your, his, her, its, our, their, mine, ours, yours, his, hers, theirs, etc.

The possessive case should be used.

Before a noun to show ownership or possession

Mike flew his kite.

Some possessive pronouns (mine, yours, hers, theirs) may be used without a noun following them.

The notebook is mine.

Yours is the best paper.

These rules for subjective, objective, and possessive cases hold true even when the pronoun occurs as part of a compound subject or object.

Subjective—Kay and he found the book.

Objective—Send the letter to Gil and her.

Possessive—Credit for the successful bake sale is Bob’s and mine.

Who and Whom

Use who as the subject of a sentence.

Who put this frog in my tea?

Show me the person who did it.

Use whom for objects in a sentence.

Whom do you wish to see?

To whom do you wish to speak?

Pronoun Reference to both Men and Women

When referring to singular nouns like “doctor” or “teacher” that include both men and women, use his or her (or her and his). If only the masculine or feminine pronoun was used, the reader might assume that only males or females are being referred to. Both the noun and the pronoun could be made plural to avoid this problem.

A doctor must be willing to listen to his or her patients.

Doctors must be willing to listen to their patients.
**Key Points to Remember**

- Pronouns must refer clearly to the nouns they replace.
- Pronouns must agree in number and gender with the nouns or other pronouns to which they refer.
- The correct pronoun case is determined by the pronoun’s function in the sentence.