

Using Pronouns Correctly: Pronoun Reference

A pronoun must refer clearly to its antecedent. Because a pronoun is a substitute word, it can express meaning clearly and definitely only if its antecedent is easily identified.

In some sentence constructions, gender and number make the reference clear.

Thomas and Jane discussed *his* absences and *her* good attendance. (gender)

If the three older boys in the club carry out those plans, it will break up. (number)

Word order can also make the reference clear. A pronoun should be placed as close to its antecedent as possible. An antecedent is preferably the noun or indefinite pronoun just before the pronoun. The following are additional guidelines for making pronoun references clear in your writing.

- When using a pronoun to refer to a general idea, make sure that the reference is clear. The pronouns used frequently in this way are *this*, *that*, *which*, and *it*. The best solution may be to recast the sentence to omit the pronoun in question.

Unclear: She whistled the same tune, *which* irritated me.

Clear: She whistled the same tune, a *habit* that irritated me.

Recast: Her whistling the same tune irritated me.

Unclear: They treated him like a criminal, and *that* angered him.

Clear: They treated him like a criminal, and *that* kind of treatment angered him.

Recast: Their treating him like a criminal angered him.

- Confusion caused by vague reference of a pronoun to its antecedent can be eliminated by repeating the word intended as the antecedent or by using a synonym for the word. Confusion may also be eliminated by rephrasing the sentence.

Unclear: You could defend his position, but *it* would be weak.

Clear: You could defend his position, but *your* defense would be weak.

Recast: Your defense of his position would be weak.

- Avoid ambiguous reference. The following sentences illustrate the kind of confusion that results from structuring sentences with more than one possible antecedent for the pronoun.

Unclear: John gave David *his* money and clothes.

Clear: John gave his own money and clothes to David.

Unclear: Mary told her sister that *her* car had a flat tire.

Clear: Mary said to her sister, "Your car has a flat tire."

- Avoid implied reference. Implied reference occurs when the antecedent is not stated; it may be a related word, a modifier, or a possessive form.

Vague: We put mosquito netting over the opening, but *some of them* still got into the tent. (a modifier)

Clear: We mosquito netting over the opening, but some of the mosquitoes still got into the tent.

Vague: This is my brother's boat, whom you met yesterday. (possessive)

Clear: This boat belongs to my brother, whom you met yesterday.

- Usually avoid the indefinite use of *it*, *they*, and *you*.

Excerpt from: Brandon, Lee. Sentences, Paragraphs, and Beyond-3rd. ed.

Using Pronouns Correctly: Case

Here are the pronouns arranged according to their case forms. The first eight are the personal pronouns; notice that only the distinctive form of *you* and *it* is the possessive. The last three pronouns are used only in questions and subordinate clauses.

<i>Nominative</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Possessive</i>
I	me	my, mine
you	you	your, yours
he	him	his, his
she	her	her, hers
it	it	its, its
we	us	our, ours
you	you	yours, yours
they	them	their, theirs
which	which	-----
who	whom	whose
whoever	whomever	whosever

Nominative/Subjective- (1) These pronouns are *subjective* of the sentence OR (2) refer back to the *subject* of the sentence.

Objective- (1) These pronouns fill the *object* position of a sentence (often coming after the verb or a preposition) OR (2) refer back to the *object* of the sentence.

Possessive- (1) These pronouns are used when showing ownership or possession.

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