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.

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

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.

Taken from *English Fundamentals, eleventh edition, form A*