

PRONOUN AND REFERENT CONFUSION

Pronouns are used to replace nouns when the audience knows what the writer or speaker is communicating about. The noun that is being replaced by the pronoun is called the referent, while the word that the pronoun refers to is called the antecedent. To avoid confusion for the audience, pronouns should only be used when the writer/speaker makes clear what the referent is that the pronoun is replacing.

Common pronouns used include: he, she, they, it, that, their, you, and me. It is essential for writers to be familiar with these common pronouns as they form the foundation of clear writing. Pronouns and their referents must agree to maintain coherence and clarity in writing. This agreement involves ensuring that the pronoun matches the number (singular or plural), person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd person), and/or gender (masculine or feminine) of its referent.

Besides the common pronouns, writers should be aware of other pronoun varieties to avoid potential mistakes and enhance the effectiveness of their writing. For example, it is important to consider gender-neutral language, such as using "they" as a singular pronoun instead of plural, to promote inclusivity in modern academic writing, a style endorsed by APA and MLA guidelines.

In this handout, we point out a couple of the most common pronoun errors writers make. We also offer a few tips to help you make sure your pronouns and referents are used clearly in your academic writing.

COMMON ERRORS AND RULES FOR CLEAR PRONOUN USE

Aside from making sure your pronouns and referents agree, there are a few common instances that can cause writers confusion when it comes to pronoun and referent agreement. We outline each of these below.

Avoiding Ambiguous References

Be cautious when writing sentences with multiple referents. Ensure that the noun your pronoun references is clear for the reader. In the example below, there are two possible antecedents (Hamlet and Polonius), leading to confusion about who "he" and "him" refer to. Below we illustrate one way of correcting that mistake:

Incorrect example: Hamlet kills Polonius because he sees him as a threat to his future plans; because of this, when he sees him he believes that he can't trust him with his private thoughts.

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Correct example: Hamlet kills Polonius because he sees Polonius as a threat to his future plans; because of this, when Hamlet sees Polonius, he believes he can't trust Polonius with his private thoughts.

Specificity in Pronoun Use

Avoid using pronouns when they create vague meaning in the sentence. In the example below, the writer should specify the group of people being referenced instead of using “they.”

Incorrect example: I don't think they should show so much violence in their movies.

Correct example: I don't think filmmakers should show so much violence in their movies.

TIPS FOR CLEAR PRONOUN USE

Remember, clear and accurate pronoun use enhances the readability and effectiveness of your writing. The suggestions below can help you avoid pronoun and referent confusion and ensure your ideas are conveyed with precision.

- When starting a new paragraph, restate the pronoun's referent to maintain clarity. Pay attention to the verbs used in the previous sentences. Sometimes, pronouns can be confusing if the last noun in the previous sentence is not the one the pronoun refers to.
- In cases where the gender or subject is unclear, avoid using pronouns that might lead to confusion. Instead, consider using the singular "they" when appropriate, as it promotes inclusivity and helps readers understand better.
- If you think your pronouns might be confusing, consider rephrasing the sentence to provide a clear and direct reference to the intended noun, like what is shown in the Specificity in Pronoun Use section.
- Practice reading your writing from the reader's perspective to check for any potential confusion caused by pronoun use.