Pronoun - Antecedent Agreement

A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun, and an antecedent is the original noun to which the pronoun refers.

Jenny walks her dog every day.

antecedent    pronoun

The antecedent and pronoun must follow these rules:

Singular Antecedent = Singular Pronoun
Plural Antecedent = Plural Pronoun

David likes his new shoes.

David = singular antecedent, his = singular pronoun

The children washed their hands.

children = plural antecedent, their = plural pronoun

Avoid indefinite references when using the pronouns it, you, and they.

- Indefinite: Without a campfire, it is difficult to stay warm.
- Better: Without a campfire, staying warm is difficult.

- Indefinite: In some schools, you do not get a summer vacation.
- Better: In some schools, students do not get a summer vacation.

- Indefinite: When we were on the plane, they told us to fasten our seatbelts.
- Better: When we were on the plane, the flight attendants told us to fasten our seatbelts.

Indefinite pronouns are singular and should refer to singular pronouns. Do not confuse indefinite pronouns as being plural pronouns. Examples of indefinite pronouns include:

- Wrong: No one should spoil their children.
- Correct: No one should spoil his or her children.
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- Wrong: Neither of the men survived their journey.
  Correct: Neither of the men survived his journey.

- Wrong: Each of the women ordered their supplies.
  Correct: Each of the women ordered her supplies.

- Wrong: Neither Brent nor Sandy remembered their appointment.
  Correct: Neither Brent nor Sandy remembered her appointment.

- Wrong: Either Lance or the Wilsons will bring his skiing equipment.
  Correct: Either Lance or the Wilsons will bring their skiing equipment.

When antecedents are joined by or or nor, the pronoun must agree in gender or number to the one nearer to it.

- Wrong: Neither Brent nor Sandy remembered their appointment.
  Correct: Neither Brent nor Sandy remembered her appointment.

- Wrong: Either Lance or the Wilsons will bring his skiing equipment.
  Correct: Either Lance or the Wilsons will bring their skiing equipment.

An exception to this rule is the indefinite pronouns both, many, several, and few. These are plural and must refer to plural pronouns.

- Wrong: Many people marry his or her high school sweetheart.
  Correct: Many people marry their high school sweetheart.

- Wrong: Both of the horses needed his hair brushed.
  Correct: Both of the horses needed their hair brushed.

- Wrong: Few children do his or her chores.
  Correct: Few children do their chores.

The indefinite pronouns most, some, all, any, none, and more can be either singular or plural depending on whether the word following the indefinite pronoun is singular or plural.

- Wrong: Some brides like her dresses to be off-white.
  Correct: Some brides like their dresses to be off-white. (brides is plural so the pronoun must be plural)

- Wrong: None of the workers took his or her lunch breaks.
  Correct: None of the workers took their lunch breaks.

Collective nouns such as team, family, jury, group, and class are antecedents that may be referred to by either singular or plural pronouns. This depends on whether the antecedent is referred to as a whole group or as the individual members of the group.
Wrong: The group has given their final decision.
Correct: The group has given its final decision.

Wrong: The family went their own separate ways.
Correct: The family went his or her own separate ways.

- When pronouns refer to more than one antecedent, avoid ambiguous or unclear references.
  
  Ambiguous: The girl brought her sister to the restaurant because she was hungry. (is the girl hungry or is the sister hungry?)
  Clear: The girl brought her sister to the restaurant because her sister was hungry.
  
  Ambiguous: We unloaded the old clothes from the boxes and then threw them away. (threw away the old clothes or the boxes?)
  Clear: We unloaded the old clothes from the boxes and then threw the boxes away.

- When using the pronouns which, this, that, and it, avoid making references to general ideas. These pronouns must make clear references to an antecedent.
  
  General: The hurricane destroyed our new garden, two of our pear trees, and even our lawn furniture. This caused us much distress.
  Clear: The hurricane destroyed our new garden, two of our pear trees, and even our lawn furniture. The storm caused us much distress.
  
  General: I enjoyed the roller coasters and the water park. They made me want to return again.
  Clear: I enjoyed the roller coasters and the water park. The rides made me want to return again.

- Avoid making weak references in which the antecedent has not been expressed but only exists in the writer’s mind.
  
  Weak: When you butter the pancakes, use a knife to spread it. (it refers to butter, but this is never stated)
  Clear: When you butter the pancakes, use a knife to spread the butter.
  
  Weak: She likes to go ghost-hunting, although she has never seen one. (one refers to ghosts, but this is never stated)
  Clear: She likes to go ghost-hunting, although she has never seen a ghost.