



Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement & Ambiguous Reference

GENERAL RULE: A pronoun (*it/they/you/he/she/we*) should have only ONE possible **antecedent** (the noun that comes before the pronoun – the noun the pronoun refers to). When there is more than one possible noun in the preceding sentence that the pronoun could refer to, readers may become confused.

PROOFREADING: As you proofread, target words like *it, they, this, these* to make sure: 1) they cannot refer to more than one noun; 2) they agree with the antecedent in number.

SPECIFIC RULES

1) A pronoun should not refer to an implied idea

Make sure that the pronoun refers to a **specific** rather than to an **implicit antecedent** to prevent confusion:

Sentence	Problem
John put a bullet in his gun and shot <u>it</u> .	The pronoun "it" can refer either to the noun "gun" or to the implied object, the "bullet."
If I told you had a beautiful body would you hold it against me?	The pronoun "it" can refer to the noun "body" or to the entire statement, "telling you that your body is beautiful."

2) Use "it" consistently and cautiously within a sentence

There are three common uses of the pronoun "it":

1) *As an idiom*

"It is snowing";

2) *To postpone the subject*

"It is untrue that a rhinoceros can run faster than my tights";

3) *As a personal pronoun*

"I wanted a rhinoceros for my birthday, but did not get **it**."

You may use all of these in academic writing, but to avoid awkwardness, you should not use more than one "it" within a single sentence:

Problem Sentence	Issue	Corrected Sentence
When it is my birthday, I hope to receive a rhinoceros, and I will walk it often.	It would be better to eliminate the first (idiomatic) "it":	On my birthday, I hope to receive a rhinoceros, and I will walk it often.

3) Use "it," "they," and "you" carefully

Sources: University of Ottawa, <http://www.writingcentre.uottawa.ca/hypergrammar/pronref.html> and Purdue Online Writing Lab, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/595/01/>

In conversation people often use expressions such as "It says in this book that ..." and "In my home town they say that ...". For academic writing, however, these constructions are imprecise:

Problem Sentence	Issue	Corrected Sentence
In debates about gay marriage, they say that same-sex unions are against the natural order.	Who says that same-sex unions are against the natural order?	In debates about gay marriage, people from conservative backgrounds say that same-sex unions are against the natural order.
In the fourteenth century, you had to struggle to survive.	In this case, "you" obviously does not refer to the reader, since the reader was not alive during the seventeenth century. It would be better to rewrite the sentence so that it expresses your idea more precisely.	In the fourteenth century, people had to struggle to survive. or In the fourteenth century, English peasant farmers had to struggle to survive.

4) Pronouns must agree in number.

That is, if the preceding noun is plural, the pronoun is plural; if the preceding noun is singular, the pronoun is singular.

Sentence	Problem
If a student parks a car on campus, they have to buy a parking sticker.	"Student" is a singular noun, so the pronoun should be singular ("he or she has to...").
Everybody ought to do their best.	The words everybody, anybody, anyone, each, neither, nobody, someone, a person, etc. are singular and take singular pronouns ("do his or her best" and "brought her umbrella").
Neither of the girls brought their umbrellas .	

NOTE: Many people find the construction "his or her" wordy, so use a plural noun as your antecedent and use "they" as your pronoun. If you do use a singular noun and the context makes the gender clear, then it is permissible to use just "his" or "her" rather than "his or her."

5) Pronouns must agree in point of view

If you are writing in the **first person** (I), don't confuse your reader by switching to the **second person** (you) or **third person** (he, she, they, it, etc.).

Problem Sentence	Corrected Sentence
When a person comes to class, you should have your homework ready.	When a person comes to class, he or she should have his or her homework ready.

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