

PRONOUN REFERENCE

What is pronoun reference?

Pronoun reference is the practice of making pronouns refer clearly to the words they replace. A pronoun takes the place of a noun; thus, the pronoun must agree with the noun it replaces in number and person. Also, it must be clear which noun the pronoun is substituting for. The noun that the pronoun is the substitute for is called the **antecedent**.

What are the basic rules for pronoun reference?

1. A pronoun must agree in number with the noun it refers to.

If the noun is singular, then the pronoun must be singular.

Incorrect: **Everyone** is studying hard for **their** exams.

Correct: **Everyone** is studying hard for **his or her** exams.

Correct: **All of the students** are studying hard for **their** exams.

2. A pronoun must agree in person with the noun it refers to.

Be consistent with first person, second person and third person.

Incorrect: If **a student** studies hard, **you** should succeed.

Correct: If **a student** studies hard, **he or she** should succeed.

3. There should be only one possible antecedent for a singular pronoun.

Only the noun that the pronoun refers to should come before the pronoun.

Incorrect: **Nguyen and Mohammed** walked to **his** English class.

Correct: **Nguyen and Mohammed** walked to **Nguyen's** English class.

Correct: **Nguyen** walked to **his** English class and Mohammed accompanied him.

4. There must be an explicit antecedent.

Don't make the reader guess what the antecedent is.

Incorrect: In the study, **they** state that writing skills are important.

Correct: In the study, the researchers state that writing skills are important.

5. A pronoun should not refer to a possessive noun.

When a noun is possessive, it functions as an adjective and so can't be replaced with a pronoun.

Incorrect: In **the professor's comments**, **she** was very encouraging.

Correct: The professor's comments were very encouraging.

Correct: **The professor** was very encouraging in **her** comments.

6. "It" must be used consistently.

If you use "it" to refer to one noun in a sentence, don't use it again to refer to another noun in the same sentence or as an idiom.

Incorrect: When **it** is busy, I hope to get a lot of **sleep** as **it** will help me work hard.

Correct: When **it** is busy, I hope to get a lot of **sleep**, **which** will help me work hard.

“Which,” “That” & “This”

Because these pronouns can refer to entire sentences and paragraphs, as well as single nouns, they must be used precisely.

Incorrect: *My professor accused me of plagiarism. **This** was unethical.*

Problem: Which was unethical: the accusation or the author’s plagiarism?

Correct: *My professor’s accusation of plagiarism was unethical.*

“Who,” “Which” & “That”

The pronoun “who” is used to refer to people and animals that have names.

The pronoun “which” is used to refer to things and animals that don’t have names.

The pronoun “that” is used to refer to things, animals that don’t have names, and, rarely, collective or anonymous people.

Avoid mixing up these pronouns.

Incorrect: A student **that** studies hard will succeed.

Correct: A student **who** studies hard will succeed.