

## Common Pronoun Problems

Remember that a *pronoun* is a word that is a substitute for a noun, and the *antecedent* is the word the pronoun refers to.

The *students* ate *their* lunches.          their=pronoun          students=antecedent

**1. Incorrect pronoun-antecedent agreement.** The pronoun must reflect the same number as its antecedent. If the antecedent is plural, its pronoun must also be plural. If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must also be singular.

Every student must study hard if *he or she* (not *they*) wants a passing grade.  
In this restaurant everyone is enjoying *his or her* (not *their*) food.

Consider the following sentence:

*Every graduate student* looks forward to the day when *they* publish *their* first article.

The problem in this sentence is that the antecedent (*every graduate student*) is singular, but the subsequent pronouns are plural (*they* and *their*). Further complicating the sentence is that revising it as suggested above makes for a “clunky” sentence.

Every graduate student looks forward to the day when he or she publishes his or her first article.

In cases such as these, make the antecedent plural so you can use the plural (and more concise) pronouns, or rewrite the sentence entirely to avoid pronoun-antecedent agreement problems.

Revision suggestions:

*All graduate students* look forward the day when *they* publish *their* first article.  
The first article published is an exciting milestone for all graduate students.

**2. Unclear pronoun reference.** A pronoun should clearly refer to its antecedent. A pronoun’s reference will be unclear if it is ambiguous, implied, vague, or indefinite.

When Juan set the beaker on the glass platform, *it* broke. (What broke?)  
Justin told Chris that *he* had won the lottery. (Who won the lottery?)  
After braiding Ann’s hair, Charlene decorated *them* with ribbons. (Where is the word that “them” refers to? It indirectly refers to the braids, but “braids” is implied.)

Revision suggestions:

When Juan set the beaker on the glass platform, the beaker broke.  
Justin told Chris, “You won the lottery!”  
After braiding Ann’s hair, Charlene decorated the braids with ribbons.

**3. Overuse of second person “you.”** Second person “you” should only be used when directly addressing the audience, such as when writing instructions. In academic writing second person “you” is rarely, if ever, used.

Most students understand that if *you* park incorrectly *you* will get a ticket.  
*You* can drink safely when *you* know *your* limits.

Usually “you” can be replaced with a specific noun or a pronoun that fits within the context.

Revision suggestions:

Most students understand that if *they* park incorrectly *they* will get a ticket.  
*Students* can drink safely when *they* know their limits.

**4. The naked “this.”** To avoid ambiguity and to ensure your audience’s understanding, follow most instances of “this” with a specific pronoun.

Allowing students to work in groups helps them create better products. This is used by many instructors.

After prolonged cramming, a student may experience intense fatigue during the test. This is usually counter-productive.

Revision suggestions:

Allowing students to work in groups helps them create better products. This *teaching technique* is used by many instructors.

After prolonged cramming, a student may experience intense fatigue during the test. This *study habit* is usually counter-productive.