

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement



Sentences are easier to understand when parts of speech grammatically agree with each other. When a pronoun and noun antecedent do not match, the meaning or clarity of ideas can be affected. This handout defines pronoun-antecedent agreement and provides common rules and considerations for pronoun-antecedent agreement. While these general principles are useful in helping you understand pronoun-antecedent agreement, always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

Definitions

A **pronoun** is a word that is substituted for a noun, such as *she* for *the woman*. An **antecedent** is the noun to which the pronoun refers. Antecedents often proceed the noun. The pronoun and antecedent typically agree when they match in terms of number (i.e., plural or singular) or person (i.e., first, second, or third person).

Incorrect: The *nurses* finished his rounds. (The antecedent is plural, and the pronoun is singular, so they do not agree.)

Correct: The *nurses* finished their rounds. (Both the antecedent and pronoun are plural, so they agree.)

Incorrect: *You* should study so *he* or *she* is ready for the test. (The antecedent is in second person, and the pronoun is in third person, so they do not agree.)

Correct: *You* should study so *you* are ready for the test. (The antecedent and pronoun both use second person, so they agree.)

Rules

Treat antecedents joined by *and* as plural.

Incorrect: *Ann* and *James* go to his school.

Correct: *Ann* and *James* go to their school.

When antecedents are joined by *or* or *nor*, the antecedent closest to the pronoun determines whether it is singular or plural.

Incorrect: *Ann* or the other *students* will forget her homework.

Correct: *Ann* or the other *students* will forget their homework.

Considerations

To address issues of gender bias, the pronouns *they*/*them*/*their* can generally take the place of a singular noun as long as the antecedent is clear.

Correct: The *writer* tries to establish his or her own credibility.

Also Correct: The *writer* tries to establish their own credibility.

Avoid being ambiguous or confusing your audience. It should be clear which noun is the antecedent the pronoun is referencing.

Unclear: *Matt* told *George* that he didn't know anything about math. (Does *he* refer to Matt or George?)

Clear: *Matt* told *George* that George didn't know anything about math.