Pronoun-Noun Agreement

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

A pronoun is a word that refers to a noun and can stand in its place. By using a pronoun, you can refer to the same person, place, thing, or idea repeatedly without using the same noun every time. For example, the following sentence becomes far less awkward when pronouns are used:

WITHOUT PRONOUNS: Molly thinks that Molly should sell Molly's car to Molly's brother.
WITH PRONOUNS: Molly thinks that she should sell her car to her brother.

Pronoun Types
Pronouns may be divided into several categories, based on how they are used:

- Demonstrative (this, that, these, those)
- Indefinite (anybody, something, etc.) (See “Pronouns as Antecedents” later in the handout.)
- Intensive or reflexive (yourself, herself, myself)
- Interrogative (who? which? what?)
- Personal (I, you, he, she, we, they)
- Possessive (my, your, her, his, their)
- Relative (who, whom, whose, which, that)

Selecting the Right Pronoun
Every pronoun must agree with its antecedent (the noun to which the pronoun refers or which it replaces). A pronoun agrees with its antecedent when they match in both number and gender.

Agreement in Number
A pronoun must match its antecedent in number. In other words, if the antecedent is plural, the pronoun must be plural, and if the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular.

EXAMPLE: Freddy wears his Superman outfit at least twice a week. (Since the word Freddy is singular, the pronoun that refers to it is also singular.)
EXAMPLE: Freddy’s parents believe that their son is slightly peculiar. (Because the word parents is plural, the pronoun referring to it must also be plural.)

Agreement in Gender
A pronoun must match its antecedent in gender. If the antecedent is feminine, use the pronouns she, her, and hers, and if it is masculine, use the pronouns he, him, and his. Plural pronouns (they, them, their, and theirs) refer to plural nouns of either gender.

EXAMPLE: Freddy’s father is embarrassed by his son.
However, Freddy’s mother thinks her son is cute.
Freddy’s aunts always take pictures of their nephew.
Freddy’s uncles enjoy playing with their sister’s superhero son.

Common Mistakes
Antecedents with Conjunctions
When singular antecedents are joined by and, use a plural pronoun to refer to them.

INCORRECT: Jim and Sally are proud of his and her new son.
CORRECT: Jim and Sally are proud of their new son.
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When antecedents are joined by or or nor, the pronoun referring to them should match the part of the antecedent that is closest to the pronoun.

EXAMPLES: Neither her sisters nor Jeannie will bring her basketball. Neither Jeannie nor her sisters will bring their basketball.

Pronouns as Antecedents
One of the most common mistakes in pronoun-antecedent agreement occurs when the antecedent of a pronoun is, itself, a pronoun. In such cases, as with noun-pronoun agreement, the two pronouns must agree with each other in both number and gender.

INCORRECT: Those boxes have unbroken lids, but these need to have its lids replaced.
CORRECT: Those boxes have unbroken lids, but these need to have their lids replaced.

Pronoun-antecedent agreement may be especially confusing when the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun. Indefinite pronouns refer to or replace nonspecific people, places, things, or ideas. The following indefinite pronouns are always singular. Consequently, pronouns that refer to them will always be singular as well:

anybody either neither somebody
anyone everybody nobody someone
each everyone one, no one

INCORRECT: Everybody needs to bring their assignment to class.
CORRECT: Everybody needs to bring his or her assignment to class.

Gender
Sometimes, a singular antecedent's gender is unknown, or the antecedent refers to a group composed of both males and females. To avoid gender bias, use both the masculine and feminine pronouns.

INCORRECT: Everyone returned his books to the library.
CORRECT: Everyone returned his or her books to the library.

If using he or she or his or her sounds awkward, rework your sentences whenever possible so that the antecedents of unknown or mixed gender are plural:

Awkward: Everyone turned in his or her homework and got out his or her textbook.
Better: All of the class members turned in their homework and got out their textbooks.

Correcting Faulty Agreement
When you have identified an error in pronoun-antecedent agreement, answering the following questions will help you to correct the problem:

1. Which word is the pronoun?
2. What is its antecedent?
3. Is the antecedent plural or singular?
4. Does the pronoun match the antecedent in number?
5. What is the gender of the antecedent?
6. Does the pronoun match the antecedent’s gender?