

Mistakes in Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to ensure proper pronoun-antecedent agreement in sentences. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Relationship between Pronouns and Antecedents
2. Use of Indefinite Pronouns
3. Correcting Pronoun Agreement Errors

1. Relationship between Pronouns and Antecedents

Recall that a pronoun is a word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase. An **antecedent**, then, is the word that a pronoun refers to and stands in for. These elements need to both agree with each other.

To create clear sentences, pronouns need clear antecedents. The one exception to this rule is when you use indefinite pronouns, which you'll learn about later in this lesson. When you're not using indefinite pronouns, you can end up with pronoun reference errors if the antecedent isn't clearly referenced by the pronoun, or if it's not clear which antecedent the pronoun is referencing.

Pronouns should always agree with their antecedent in number and gender. Personal pronouns, for instance, are different based on the gender of the person being described, and they are always either plural or singular.

Thus, if the pronoun is singular, so too must be the antecedent that it's referencing. Likewise, if an antecedent is plural, then the pronoun that will refer to it needs to also be plural.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "We went into the classroom and took our seats," notice that the pronoun "we" is plural; likewise, "our seats" is plural.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "My dad ate his cookies," "my dad" is singular and specifically male. Thus, "his" replaces "my dad" with the singular male version of those words.

If you find pronoun-antecedent agreement errors, you'll definitely want to fix them to make sure that your readers understand your intended meaning. That's one of the things you'll often do in the editing stage of the writing process.



TERM TO KNOW

Antecedent

A word that a pronoun refers to and stands in for.

2. Use of Indefinite Pronouns

Sometimes you'll have pronouns that correctly don't refer to any specific antecedent. These pronouns replace nouns without being specific about which nouns they are standing in for. This is one way of referring broadly.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "Everyone is going to love my cookies," "everyone" is an indefinite pronoun because it refers broadly to a nonspecific group of people.

Even though indefinite pronouns are a special kind of pronoun, they still have to follow the rest of the rules:

- They need to be singular or plural.
- They need to agree with the number of their verbs.
- They need to match in number and gender any pronouns that refer to them.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "Something about my cookies makes them delicious," "Something" is an indefinite pronoun, and it is singular. Thus, the verb "make" is also given in the singular form.

There are times, however, when these indefinite pronouns will be mistaken as plural, even though they're actually singular. Therefore, be particularly careful with the singular indefinites, such as "anyone," "someone," "nobody," "everybody," "anything," and "something."



HINT

Just think about the roots of those words— one, body, thing. They are all singular, which helps you remember that those indefinite pronouns are also singular.

If, in contrast, you need to use a plural indefinite, try words such as "few," "several," or "both."

3. Correcting Pronoun Agreement Errors

To identify and correct errors in pronoun and antecedent relationships, it can be helpful to look at them in the context of a piece of writing.

Robots will never effectively replace teachers in the classroom. Teachers perform many functions that robots can't: They are experts in their subject matter, know how to express it in an accessible manner, are skillful at managing the classroom, and are able to connect with their students. Everything on this list are necessary for students to learn efficiently. Robots simply can't perform all these tasks. First of all, no one has emotional connections with robots because it can't respond to anybody's emotional state. While robots may be programmed to know the material, they won't necessarily be able to explain it to us clearly. And since a robot can't move like a person, they won't be able to manage the classroom. Ask people if they want robot teachers, and I bet they will say no!

What kinds of pronouns and pronoun errors do you see here? Start by highlighting all of the pronouns you see.

*Robots will never effectively replace teachers in the classroom. Teachers perform many functions that robots can't: **They** are experts in **their** subject matter, know how to express **it** in an accessible manner, are skillful at managing the classroom, and are able to connect with **their** students. **Everything** on this list are necessary for students to learn efficiently. Robots simply can't perform all these tasks. First of all, **no one** has emotional connections with robots because **it** can't respond to anybody's emotional state. While robots may be programmed to know the material, **they** won't necessarily be able to explain **it** to **us** clearly. And since a robot can't move like a person, **they** won't be able to manage the classroom. Ask people if **they** want robot teachers, and I bet **they** will say no!*

Here, you can see a pronoun doing its job correctly: *Teachers perform many functions that robots can't: They are experts....* "They" is a plural personal pronoun that isn't gender specific. It's referring to "teachers," which is also plural and non-gendered.

And here, you have an indefinite pronoun that refers to a hypothetical student: *First of all, no one has emotional connections....* See how "has" is singular to match "no one"? If the pronoun itself were plural, you'd need to write "have."

Here, however, there is an agreement error: *Everything on this list are necessary for students to learn efficiently.* The verb should be "is" to agree with the singular pronoun "everything," in accordance with subject-verb agreement.

And here's one last mistake: *First of all, no one has emotional connections with robots because it can't respond to anybody's emotional state.* "Robots," the antecedent, is plural, so the pronoun "it" should be "they."



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **relationship between pronouns and antecedents** requires that pronouns have clear antecedents that agree with them. Sometimes you'll encounter the **use of indefinite pronouns**; these pronouns don't refer to any specific antecedent in the interest of referring broadly. Even though they are a special kind of pronoun, indefinite pronouns still have to follow the

rules of agreement. Finally, you practiced **correcting pronoun agreement errors** by identifying pronouns and antecedents in context and checking to see if they match in gender and number.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Antecedent

A word that a pronoun refers to and stands in for.