

Pronoun Choice and Pronoun Reference

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers pronouns—how to choose them correctly, how they function grammatically within sentences, and how to identify and correct errors in usage:

1. Pronoun Choice
2. Personal Pronoun Usage
 - 2a. Possessive Pronouns
 - 2b. Subject Pronouns
 - 2c. Object Pronouns
 - 2d. Subject/Object Pronouns
3. Correcting Pronoun Errors

1. Pronoun Choice

If you think back to the parts of speech, you'll remember that a **pronoun** is a word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase.

If that pronoun is standing in for something else, you need to be sure that you select the correct pronoun to match what it's meant to replace.

In other words, when you're thinking about pronoun choice, you should be thinking about finding the right pronoun to function as you need it to in that sentence.



TERM TO KNOW

Pronoun

A word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase.

2. Personal Pronoun Usage

Pronoun choice is particularly important when you're using **personal pronouns**, which are English pronouns that identify gender, person, number, and case.

If a pronoun stands in for any noun, personal pronouns stand in for a specific person or thing, such as in these sentences:

Mary is a fast runner.

She is a fast runner.

See how “she” replaces Mary’s name, thereby representing her?

There are a few different kinds of personal pronouns:

- Possessive pronouns
- Subject pronouns
- Object pronouns
- Subject/object pronouns

It's important to use them correctly and reference them appropriately.



TERM TO KNOW

Personal Pronoun

English pronouns that identify gender, person, number, and case.

2a. Possessive Pronouns

Pronouns that always show possession don't use an apostrophe, such as the pronouns my/mine or her/hers.

You can see that at work in sentences, such as:

That rabbit is mine.

Those rabbits are hers.

If you were using the person's name instead of the pronoun, you would use an apostrophe to indicate possession, as in:

Mary's rabbit.

2b. Subject Pronouns

Another way that pronouns are used is as **subjects**. The subject is who or what the sentence is about. Therefore, the subject pronoun is also what the sentence will be about.

Some personal pronouns are just for subjects, such as I, he, she, it, they, we, and who. Sentences that use those will look something like:

She is going to be president.

We are going to vote.

In other circumstances, you might have compound subjects, meaning there's a whole phrase that the sentence is about. How do you choose which pronoun to use as the subject in one of these compound constructions? The rule is that you should use the same pronoun you would use if it alone were the subject.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** If the sentence is “The dog and I are going for a walk,” you wouldn’t say, “me are going for a walk.” You would say, “I am going for a walk.” By the same token, you wouldn’t write “The dog and me are going for a walk.” You’d write “The dog and I are going for a walk.”



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Subject

Who or what the sentence is about.

2c. Object Pronouns

Other times, pronouns function as **objects** within sentences. An object in a sentence is the item acted upon by the subject.

Some pronouns, such as me, her, him, them, us, and whom, are always used for the object of a sentence. Those would look like:

The teacher brought us doughnuts this morning.

The dog gave me a big kiss on the mouth.

As you notice, the object in both of these sentences is the thing being affected by the verb. That’s how the object functions.

However, objects can also complete the meaning of a prepositional phrase, as in the sentence:

Samantha sat between Richard and me at the concert.

In this context, the preposition is “between,” and “me” answers the question, “Between who?”

2d. Subject/Object Pronouns

Some pronouns can work for either subjects or objects, such as the pronouns you and it, as in:

It is too early for loud music.

The “it” there is the subject of the sentence, but it can also be used for an object as if you wrote:

My sister loves lasagna, but I don't like it.

The “it” replaces “lasagna” and is the object of the verb “like.”

You, therefore, need to watch how you use object pronouns and subject pronouns, making sure that you're using them correctly without leading to any unintended meaning.



HINT

Although pronouns usually have a clear antecedent, the words “it” and “there,” sometimes do not have clear antecedents:

It is too early for loud music.

There isn't a cloud in the sky.

These are called *dummy pronouns* or *expletive pronouns*. They fill a grammatical need to have a subject in the sentence but do not have a clear antecedent. Such sentences are grammatically correct, but it is better style to avoid them by making the subject of the sentence a concrete noun.

The music is too loud for so early in the day!

The sky is completely clear!



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Object

The item acted upon by the subject in a sentence.

3. Correcting Pronoun Errors

To understand how to identify and correct errors, it's helpful to view these issues in the context of a piece of writing.

This morning, I went on a hike with my dog. We went to the beach; he and me had to climb a big hill to get down to it. We found a ball on the beach and were playing fetch with it because we didn't know who owned the ball. Then we saw another dog and her owner, and it turned out that the ball was her's; my dog dropped it immediately. But they gave the ball to he, and everyone played happily.

What errors can you find? First, highlight all the pronouns you see.

*This morning, I went on a hike with **my** dog. **We** went to the beach; **he** and **me** had to climb a big hill to get down to **it**. **We** found a ball on the beach and were playing fetch with **it** because **we** didn't know **who** owned the ball. Then **we** saw another dog and **her** owner, and it turned out that the ball was **her's**; **my** dog dropped **it** immediately. But **they** gave the ball to **he**, and everyone played happily.*

That first sentence is correct, but here you can see a problem with “he and me” in the second sentence:

*We went to the beach; **he** and **me** had to climb a big hill to get down to it.*

Would you say, “he had to climb”? Yes. But would you say, “me had to climb”? No. Thus, the pronouns should be “he” and “I” for this compound subject.

In that same sentence, the word **it** at the end is an object pronoun:

*We went to the beach; he and I had to climb a big hill to get down to **it**.*

Is this used correctly? The sentence is saying that the subjects are climbing down the hill to the beach. In this case, “it” stands in for “beach.” That’s correct, as are the other pronouns in the next sentence.

But what about here?

*Then we saw another dog and her owner, and it turned out that the ball was **her's***

This is a possessive pronoun. The owner belongs to the dog, or perhaps vice versa. That’s phrased correctly, but in this possessive pronoun, the ball also belongs to the dog. Do you use an apostrophe on possessive pronouns? No, so this should be “hers.”

Here’s another error:

*But they gave the ball to **he**, and everyone played happily.*

The verb is “give,” and the subject is “they,” doing the giving. “They” is a subject pronoun, so that is correct. But what about “he”? That’s also a subject pronoun, but in this sentence construction, the dog is the object. Therefore, this should be “They gave the ball to him.”



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **pronoun choice** is extremely important in the writing of clear sentences, particularly when **using personal pronouns**. Personal pronouns are pronouns that specifically identify gender, person, number, and case. These can be **possessive pronouns**, **subject pronouns**, or **object pronouns**. Some personal pronouns can even function as either a **subject or object**, depending on the sentence.

You also practiced identifying and **correcting pronoun errors** in writing. This is a useful skill as you continue to polish and perfect your own writing moving forward.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Object

The item acted upon by the subject in a sentence.

Personal Pronoun

English pronouns that identify gender, person, number, and case.

Pronoun

A word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase.

Subject

Who or what the sentence is about.