Pronounitis
Fixing Pesky Pronoun Errors

Pronouns are an essential part of English (and indeed, of most languages). They make it possible for sentences to flow without confusion, and they clarify one subject or object from the next. However, because pronouns are so fundamentally tied to the flow of a sentence, using them improperly can cause considerable confusion.

Pronouns are words that work hand in hand with other parts of the sentence. It's often said that pronouns "take the place of nouns," but that's not entirely accurate. A more appropriate way to describe pronouns is that they usually *act like* nouns but are not nouns.

The incorrect use of pronouns can lead to a number of sentence structure errors, most of which stem either from a pronoun being used where a noun or noun phrase is actually needed, or from a pronoun that's used in the right place but not in the right way. Either way, understanding how to fix pronoun errors – and more importantly, how to *avoid* pronoun errors – is a key to writing successfully.

Key Pronoun-Related Terms

One thing that sometimes prevents people from learning how to use pronouns properly is the grammatical terms associated with pronouns, which can be a little overwhelming. Really, for the most common pronoun errors, there are four pronoun-related terms that are important to know:

- **Antecedent:** The antecedent is simply the noun t which the pronoun refers. For instance, in the sentence, "Jack took his dog for a walk," the word "his" is a pronoun, and "Jack" is the antecedent because "his" refers to "Jack" (that is, you could use Jack's name in place of "his"). The antecedent need not always be in the same sentence as the pronoun, as long as the reference is clear. For example, "The pilots talked on the radio. They then turned on the seatbelt sign." In that example, "the pilots" is still the antecedent of "they," even though it's in a separate sentence.
- **Personal pronouns:** These are pronouns that have specific nouns of noun phrases as antecedents. Some examples are *I*, *we*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*.
- **Relative pronouns:** These are pronouns that connect their antecedents to the rest of the sentence or thought. Some examples are *who*, *which*, and *that*.
- **Pronoun reference:** This is the connection between a pronoun and its antecedent.

There are other types of pronouns and pronoun-related terms, but those listed are the keys to understanding most pronoun-related errors. Most pronoun errors come down to a relatively simple mistake. The most common pronoun errors occur for one of three reasons.

- Unclear pronoun reference
- Vague subjects
- Problems in agreement

Unclear Pronoun Reference

A key reason pronoun errors occur is because the relationship between pronouns and their antecedents is not clear. Personal pronouns – especially "they" and "it" because of how encompassing they are – have to have clear relationships with their antecedents. The pronoun reference is unclear when one pronoun could refer to multiple antecedents.

> UNCLEAR: Kayakers should check their boats carefully so *they* don't leak.

The above example is an unclear pronoun reference because "they" could refer to more than one of the nouns in the sentence. Who might leak: the kayakers or their boats? As it's written, it's unclear. Often, this can be corrected by rewording the sentence to eliminate the need for a pronoun altogether.

> CLEAR: Kayakers should check their boats carefully for leaks.

The above sentence is clearer and has better flow because it's been rewritten in a way that avoids pronoun complications simply by not having a pronoun. Sometimes hat's as simple as replacing a pronoun with a noun. For example:

> UNCLEAR: A difference between kayaks and canoes is that *they* usually fit more people.

> CLEAR: A difference between kayaks and canoes is that *canoes* usually fit more people.

Vague Subject Pronouns

The error of a vague subject pronoun is a pronoun reference error that is specific to subject pronouns. When a pronoun is used as a subject, it still needs to have an antecedent, and the relationship between pronoun and antecedent must still be clear. This is true even when the pronoun is used at the beginning of a sentence. For instance:

> VAGUE: I tripped and got soaked even before getting into the kayak, then we hit unexpected rapids, and then after that, my boat capsized. *It* was quite frustrating.

In this example, "it" is unclear as a subject. What was frustrating: the tripping, the rapids, the capsizing, or all of these things? The simplest way to correct this is to just replace the pronoun with an actual subject.

> CLEAR: I tripped and got soaked even before getting into the kayak, then we hit unexpected raids, and then after that, my boat capsized. That series of events was quite frustrating.

The Ever-Mysterious "They" and "It"

One of the most common examples of a vague subject pronoun is the overuse of "they," often preceded by a prepositional phrase using "in" or "with" or another similar word. The same thing (to a somewhat lesser extent)

occurs frequently with "it." Often, this is simply an unnecessarily wordy distraction, where "they" is used as a subject even though the intended subject is already there. For example:

> VAGUE: In the new law, *they* made kayaking illegal near the dam.

Look at the above sentence: to whom does "they" refer? You might be tempted to say "the government," or "the city council," and those *could* be right, but really it is "the new law" that made kayaking illegal, so it's much simpler to just eliminate the prepositional phrase and pronoun, and use "the new law" as the subject proper.

> CLEAR: *The new law* made kayaking illegal near the dam.

Similar problems can occur with "it," often because the subject is unknown, or because the sentence is poorly planned. For example:

> VAGUE: In the article, *it* states that kayaking experienced a surge of popularity in the 1990s.

In this example, the sentence clearly seems to be referring to some type of outside source ("the article"), but what is "it"? This is vague and unclear. The most obvious answer is "the article," and if that's the case, the whole "in" phrase becomes unnecessary.

> CLEAR: *The article* states that kayaking experienced a surge of popularity in the 1990s.

Alternatively, the sentence could be written with the author as the subject.

> CLEAR: In the article, the author states that kayaking experienced a surge of popularity in the 1990s.

Pronoun-Antecedent Disagreement

By far, the most common error with pronouns is using pronouns that don't agree with their antecedents. Probably the most common example of this type of error is wrongly using "they" with a singular antecedent. The pronoun "they" (and its object and possessive forms "them" and "their") is always plural. It can't be used with singular antecedents because it's not a singular pronoun.

> WRONG: If a kayaker is concerned about safety, *they* should wear a helmet.

The above sentence is wrong. Since the antecedent is "a kayaker," which is singular, we can't use "they" as a pronoun, because it's plural. The singular pronouns in third person are *he*, *she*, and *it*. We don't know the gender of "a kayaker," but that doesn't mean we should use "it." The word "it" is *not* gender-neutral; it is *non-gender*. There is a difference. English has *no* gender-neutral pronoun for singular third person. "They" is gender-neutral, but it only applies to plural antecedents. In order to remain gender-neutral for singular antecedents, you need to use both pronouns.

> RIGHT: If a kayaker is concerned about safety, *he or she* should wear a helmet.

On the other hand, if all the "he or she," "him or her," and "his or her" feels clunky and cumbersome, you can also (sometimes) correct the error by making the antecedent plural. Of course, you should only do that if doing so will not alter the meaning of the sentence. Either way, whether you change the pronoun or the antecedent, they need to be consistent.

> RIGHT: If *kayakers* are concerned about safety, *they* should wear *helmets*.

Notice in the above example that the antecedent was made plural, but "helmets" was also made plural. Consistency is important; after all, these kayakers are presumably not all sharing a single helmet. Of course, sometimes it's more awkward to fix the pronoun than it would be to simply use a noun (or in some cases, a relative pronoun clause). The important thing is to make sure the sentence flows smoothly.

> RIGHT: Kayakers *who are concerned about safety* should wear helmets.

In that example, the sentence was restructured in such a way that pronouns became unnecessary altogether, thus eliminating any pronoun confusion.

Additional Writing Center Resources

- Point of View
- Subject-Verb Agreement

Further Reading

- "Using Pronouns Clearly." Purdue University Online Writing Lab.
  https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/595/01
- "Pronouns and Antecedents." Bonnie Mills and Mignon Fogerty. *Grammar Girl: Quick and Dirty Tips*.
  www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/pronouns-and-antecedents