

Grammar: using pronouns

Pronouns are words that replace nouns so that you don't need to repeat the same noun several times in a text (e.g. **The computer** started up but then **it** crashed because **it** is old NOT **The computer** started up but then **the computer** crashed because **the computer** is old.). To use pronouns correctly in your writing, you will need to understand how to:

1. use correct pronouns in sentences
2. make pronouns agree with their antecedent
3. make pronoun references clear



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will NOT help at all with getting your **noun-pronoun matches** correct. It takes the human eye to locate the pronoun and then go back to the noun or noun group to make sure that there is a correct match in number, person and gender. It can signal incorrect grammatical use of a pronoun, but this is not always consistent.

1. Use correct pronouns in sentences

❖ Types of pronouns

Personal pronouns	e.g. I, me, mine, you, your, yours, he, him, his, she, her, hers, it, one, we, they
Relative pronouns	e.g. who, whom, whose, which, that
Interrogative pronouns	e.g. who, what, when, where, why
Indefinite pronouns	e.g. someone, somebody, something, anyone, anybody, anything, everyone, no one
Demonstrative pronouns	e.g. this, that, these, those
Reflexive pronouns	e.g. myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves

❖ Personal pronouns change case in sentences

Person/Number	Pronouns used as the subject	Pronouns used as the object	Pronouns used for possession
1 st person singular	I	me	my, mine
2 nd person singular	you	you	your, yours
3 rd person singular	he, she, it	him, her, it	his, her, hers, its
1 st person plural	we	us	our, ours
2 nd person plural	you	you	your, yours
3 rd person plural	they	them	their, theirs

Personal pronouns change form depending on the role they play in sentences (e.g. whether they are the subject, the object or showing ownership). While you are DISCOURAGED from using first and second person pronouns in your academic writing, you need to learn how to use 'case' correctly in your oral and written language.

Examples

❖ Use the correct pronoun for subjects, objects and possessive case.

- ✗ ~~Us~~ (We) students are learning how to do word processing for essay writing. (SUBJECT)
- ✗ ~~Me and the other students~~ (The other students and I) are studying. (SUBJECT)
- ✗ The excellence award recognised ~~she and the team~~ (the team and her). (OBJECT OF A VERB)
- ✗ The choice of program was ~~between~~ them and I (me). (OBJECT OF A PREPOSITION)
- ✗ The computer and programs are ~~yourselves~~ yours. (POSSESSIVE PRONOUN)

❖ Use the correct case for relative pronouns 'who', 'whom', 'whose'

- ✓ Students will train with the computer programmers **who** work in IT. (SUBJECT)
- ✓ Students **who** work with their computer skills find online learning easy. (SUBJECT)
- ✓ The students **whom** the programmer instructed excelled in their tasks. (OBJECT OF A VERB)
- ✓ Students **for whom** online learning is difficult should seek training. (OBJECT OF A PREPOSITION)
- ✓ Students **whose** passwords were updated need to reset their browser. (POSSESSION)

2. Make pronouns agree with their antecedent

A pronoun needs to agree with the word it is referring to (the antecedent). To achieve clarity and consistency in your sentences, make sure pronouns agree with the antecedent in number, gender and person.

Examples

- ✗ Every **computer operator** must have ~~their~~ username and password.
- ✓ Every **computer operator** must have **his or her** username and password.
(‘Every’ is singular, so it needs to be followed by a singular pronoun)
- ✗ **Microsoft** is more reliable because of ~~their~~ higher quality product, and ~~their~~ better security.
- ✓ **Microsoft** is the more reliable product because of **its** higher quality, and **its** better security.
(Microsoft is a ‘thing’ [company] so use ‘its’.)
- ✗ When **a student** logs on, ~~you~~ should have ~~your~~ password ready.
- ✗ When **a student** logs on, ~~they~~ should have ~~their~~ password ready.
- ✓ When **you** log on, **you** should have **your** password ready. (SECOND PERSON)
- ✓ When **a student** logs on, **he or she** should have **his or her** password ready. (THIRD PERSON)
(Make all references second person pronouns only OR third person pronouns only.)

3. Make pronoun references clear

A pronoun should refer clearly to its antecedent. Avoid ambiguous or indefinite references.

Examples

- ❖ **Ambiguous references occur if there is more than one possible antecedent.**
- ✗ The **programmer** told the **student** that **he** had changed **his** password.
(Who changed the password? Whose password? The student or the programmer?)
- ✓ The programmer said that he had changed the student’s password.
- ✗ Although the new software **program** corrupted the **file**, **it** could still be used.
(What was still possible to use? Does ‘it’ meant the ‘program’ or the ‘file’?)
- ✓ Although the file was corrupted by the new program, **the file** could still be used.
- ❖ **Indefinite references occur when ‘they’, ‘it’ or ‘you’ refer to people or things that are not specifically mentioned in the text, or are indirectly mentioned.**
- ✗ In the last budget, **they** did not allocate any more money for computers.
- ✓ In the last budget, **the government** did not allocate any more money for computers.
(Who is ‘they’? Be specific. Name the person or thing—in this case, ‘the government’.)
- ✗ In the article, **it** suggests that students prefer online learning.
- ✓ The **article** suggests that students prefer online learning.
(Don’t use ‘it’ indefinitely like this. Be specific. Rewrite your sentence with the thing [article] clearly stated.)
- ❖ **Don’t use pronouns like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘which’, ‘it’ to refer to whole ideas.**
- ✗ The growing popularity of online learning has resulted in universities opening more distance education courses. **This** has meant that there is a greater need for computer programmers.
(‘This’ refers to the whole previous sentence. Demonstrative pronouns like ‘this’ should refer to a specific thing and not a whole idea.)
- ✓ The growing popularity of online learning has resulted in universities opening more distance education courses. **This trend** has meant that there is a greater need for computer programmers.