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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person/Number</th>
<th>Pronouns as subjects</th>
<th>Pronouns as the objects</th>
<th>Pronouns for possession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person singular</td>
<td>I, me, mine</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>my, mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person singular</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your, yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person singular</td>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>him, her, it</td>
<td>his, her, hers, its</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st person plural</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>our, ours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person plural</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your, yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person plural</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>them</td>
<td>their, theirs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 yours (yourselves). (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 you log on, **you** should have your password ready. (SECOND PERSON)
- **✗** When a student logs on, **they** should have their password ready.
- **✓** 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.
    (What was still possible to use? Does ‘it’ meant the ‘program’ or the ‘file’?)
  - 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.