

Problems with Pronouns

AN ANTECEDENT IS THE WORD THE PRONOUN REFERS TO.

When you write, it is important to avoid sentences in which a pronoun does not agree with its **antecedent**. All pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number, person, and gender.

Read the following sentence: As Amy looked at her newly born niece, **she** smiled.

Can you tell who is smiling in the sentence? Is Amy smiling or is the baby smiling? The pronoun, **she**, is unclear.

The following sentence is rewritten to make it clearer:

Amy smiled as **she** looked at her newly born niece.
Amy is the antecedent of the pronoun *she*.

Read the following sentence: When he opened the freezer to take out the fish, **it** made a startling hissing sound.

Did the freezer make a startling hissing sound or did the fish make a startling hissing sound? The following sentence is rewritten to make it clearer:

The **freezer** made a startling hissing sound when he opened **it** to take out the fish.
Freezer is the antecedent of the pronoun *it*.

Read the following sentences. Rewrite them so they are more easily understood.
As Joey talked to his best friend on the phone, **he** was walking to the front door.

When Terrie put the cat Pogo outside, **she** began to cry.

Before David went to his friend's house, **he** had to finish his homework.

After she opened the garage door to back out the car, **it** started to shake.

Activity: Grab a novel from the front of the room. List TEN personal pronouns from any place in that novel, but you must also list the antecedent of those pronouns. Note that the antecedent might not be on that very page; you may have to flip backward to find what the pronoun refers to, particularly if you are taking a sample from the middle of the book.

Each of the following sentences has a pronoun with a vague or unclear antecedent. Rewrite each sentence so that the pronouns do have an antecedent.

1. As I came home, **it** reminded me of a scary movie.

2. According to the story, **they** are looking for happiness and contentment.

—

3. Though they try hard to please everyone, they always find people who are unhappy with the food.

4. As the glass started to fall off the table, I grabbed it.

5. All you card sharks who spend free time playing cards in the cafeteria should sign up for them in the tournament.

6. When I return a book to the library, they always look at its due date.

7. The weather will play an important role in planning your trip. Your next step will be to find out the climate for that particular city.

8. Now that I have a job, I can buy things without having to ask them for the money.

9. I like to unpack crates because I can see them before all the other people do.

10. Parents cannot keep children from watching television, but that may be what TV is coming to.

Pronouns can be overused

Pronouns definitely have a function in the English language, and we use personal pronouns primarily to avoid saying the same nouns over and over. However, if pronouns are used too much, they can lead to awkward sentence structure or needless repetition. Three rules should be followed with pronouns: 1) always make sure they have an antecedent and 2) use them only when necessary. If you can write a sentence without a pronoun without the sentence being confusing, then do it. 3) Pronoun use should match the voice and tone of the type of paper you are writing. (For example, avoid pronouns when

writing formal research papers.)

See the example in this paragraph:

It'd been three hours since she'd discovered Patrick's body. Three hours since she'd given her statement to the officer. Three hours since she'd been released from the scene. Three hours since she had seen Josh. She rubbed her upper arms and paced back and forth. The initial shock had worn off, but the chill pervaded deep inside. She had done her exercises to relieve tension. Several times she had been tempted to go out and just run. *10 pronouns.*

Some pronouns can be eliminated by restructuring/ rewriting the sentences.

This is the new example:

It'd been three hours since she discovered Patrick's body. Three hours since giving a statement to the officer. Three hours since being released from the scene. Three hours since she had seen Josh. Josh.. Rae rubbed her upper arms and paced, wondering if a hole was wearing in the new carpet. The initial shock had worn off but the chill pervaded deep inside. She'd tried exercises. They didn't relieve the tension. Several times, she had been tempted to go out and just run. Run until this whole awful thing became a fog--something that had happened to someone else. But no, she was an adult. Adults didn't run. *6 pronouns*

Academic Tone

Understanding pronouns in writing is important because certain types of writing involve use of certain types of pronouns. In narrative writing, it is acceptable to use all pronoun types, including first-person pronouns, because narrative writing involves telling a personal story. In all other forms of writing, however, you should never assume that first and second person pronouns are OK. If unsure, ask your teacher or professor.

Why are 2nd person pronouns frowned upon?

The reason why we want to avoid using second-person pronouns (you, your, yours) in writing is because it's an overly familiar way of writing. When we are writing papers for class, using "you" is just too informal. We tend to rely on it too often when we are unsure of what we want to say or are not used to writing formally. Using "you" assumes that the reader feels the way you are asserting in your writing.

Example: If you do not educate yourself on presidential candidates, you are taking a huge risk as to whom you vote for.

If I took the time to educate myself before every presidential election, then I obviously do not appreciate the reader assuming by using "you." Save "you" for informal letters, emails, and conversation.

How do you avoid YOU?

1. Replace "you" with "the reader." Do this when writing about things that the author shows.

Incorrect: Lee shows you what a great father Atticus is.

CORRECT: Lee shows the reader what a great father Atticus is.

Incorrect: Dally's words show you what a tough person he is.

CORRECT: Dally's words show the reader what a tough person he is.

2. Replace "you" with "one." Do this when talking about people in general.

Incorrect: Clearly, you must not judge people before knowing them.

