**Achieving Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement**

A pronoun must agree with (match) the noun or pronoun it refers to in number. It must be either singular (one) or plural (more than one). If a pronoun is singular, it must also match the noun or pronoun it refers to in gender (*he*, *she*, or *it*).

**CONSISTENT** Mary sold *her* old television set. [*Her* agrees with *Mary* because both are singular and feminine.]

**CONSISTENT** The Wilsons sold *their* old television set. [*Their* agrees with *the Wilsons* because both are plural.]

* Watch out for singular, general nouns. If a noun is singular, the pronoun that refers to it must be singular as well.

**INCONSISTENT** Any student can tell you what *their* least favorite course is.[*Student* is singular, but the pronoun *their* is plural.]

**CONSISTENT** Any student can tell you what *his* or *her* least favorite course is.[*Student* is singular, and so are the pronouns *his* and *her*.]

* To avoid using the awkward phrase *his or her*, make the subject plural when you can.

**CONSISTENT** Most students can tell you what *their* least favorite course is.

Two types of words often cause errors in pronoun agreement: indefinite pronouns and collective nouns.

* ***Indefinite Pronouns***

An **indefinite pronoun** does not refer to a specific person, place, or thing: It is general. Indefinite pronouns often take singular verbs. Indefinite pronouns include words like **each, either, neither, any, everybody, somebody,** and **nobody.** Whenever an indefinite pronoun is used as an antecedent, the pronoun that refers to it should be singular.

**Faulty** Neither of the actors had learned their lines.

**Revision** Neither of the actors had learned his lines.

As the revised example shows, this rule applies even when the pronoun is followed by a plural noun. When the gender of the antecedent is unknown, you may follow it with **his** or **her**, or if this results in awkwardness, rewrite the sentence in the plural.

**Correct** Anyone who has studied his or her assignmentsproperly should do well on the test.

**Correct**  Those who have studied their assignments properly should do well on the test.

* ***Collective Nouns***

A **collective noun** names a group that acts as a single unit. Collective nouns are usually singular, so when you use a pronoun to refer to a collective noun, it too must usually be singular.

The team had its sixth consecutive win of the season.

The jury returned its verdict.

If the people in a group are acting as individuals, however, the noun is plural and should be used with a plural pronoun.

The class brought *their* papers to read.

* ***Two Singular Antecedents***

Two or more antecedents joined by ‘and’ ordinarily call for a plural pronoun.

**Correct** Her briefcase and umbrella were missing from **their** usual place on the hall table.

* When **‘each’** or **‘every’** precedes the antecedent, use a **singular** pronoun.

**Incorrect** Every college and university must do their best to provide adequate student counseling.

**Correct** Every college and university must do its best to provide adequate student counseling.

* Singular antecedents joined by **or**, **either\_\_or**, or **neither\_\_nor** call for singular pronouns.

**Correct** Neither Carol nor Irene had paid her rent for the month.

Applying this rule can sometimes yield an awkward sentence. When this happens, rewrite the sentence to avoid the problem.

**Faulty** Neither James nor Sally has finished his or her term project.

**Revision** James and Sally have not finished their term projects.

* Singular antecedents joined by ‘and’ and referring to the same person, place, or thing use a singular pronoun.

**Correct** My friend and business partner is leaving his native country.

* ***Singular and Plural Antecedents*** If one singular and one plural antecedent are joined by ‘or’, ‘either\_\_or’, or ‘neither\_\_nor’, the pronoun agrees with the closer one.

**Correct** Either Terrence James or the Parkinsons will let us use their lawn mower.

**Correct** Either the Parkinsons or Terrence James will let us use his lawn mower.

Sentences of this sort are generally smoother when the plural subject follows the singular.

**Making Pronoun Reference Clear**

If the reader isn’t sure what noun or pronoun a pronoun refers to, the sentence may be confusing. Look for and edit any sentence that has an ambiguous, vague, or repetitious pronoun reference.

In an **ambiguous pronoun reference**, the pronoun could refer to more than one noun.

**AMBIGUOUS** Enrico told Jim *he* needed a better resume. [Did Enrico tell Jim that Enrico himself needed a better resume? Or did Enrico tell Jim that Jim needed a better resume?]

**EDITED** Enrico advised Jim to revise his resume.

**AMBIGUOUS** I put the glass on the shelf, even though *it* was dirty. [Was the glass or the shelf dirty?]

**EDITED** I put the dirty glass on the shelf.

In a **vague pronoun reference**, the pronoun does not refer clearly to any particular person, place, or thing. To correct a vague pronoun reference, use a more specific noun instead of the pronoun.

**VAGUE** When Tom got to the clinic, *they* told him it was closed. [Who told Tom the clinic was closed?]

**EDITED** When Tom got to the clinic, the nurse told him it was closed.

**VAGUE** Before I finished printing my report, *it* ran out of paper. [What was out of paper?]

**EDITED** Before I finished printing my report, the printer ran out of paper.

In a **repetitious pronoun reference**, the pronoun repeats a reference to a noun rather than replacing the noun.

The newspaper, it says that the new diet therapy is promising.

**INCORRECT** My instructor he gives us lots of homework.

**CORRECT** My instructor gives us lots of homework.

**Practice:** **I/Most of the following sentences contain pronouns that do not agree with their antecedents. Cross out each incorrect pronoun. Then, write the correct pronoun. If a sentence is already correct, write *C.***

1. Neither Mr. Syms nor Mr. Karras had worn their glasses.

2. Whether a candidate wins or not, they must submit a report about campaign expenditures.

3. Both Aola and Phoebe passed the driver’s test and received their licenses.

4. That is a decision that everyone must make for themselves.

5. Krista and her brother asked me to go with them on a hiking trip.

6. No one on the city council has suggested that they will vote for the new ordinance.

7. Both Mr. Kelly and Mrs. Arcaro accepted their awards with gratitude.

8. Several local artists displayed their paintings during the festival.

9. Many of the Rotary Club members expressed his appreciation to the speaker.

10. Most of the hikers remembered to bring their own lunches.

11. Several of the stones had strange markings on it.

*1*2. The Netherlands reclaimed two fifths of their land from the North Sea.

*1*3. I hope you saw the news last night; we were on them!

*1*4. Alarmed, the herd of gazelles scattered when it scented the lions.

*1*5. All of the designers used variations on this curve for their doors.

*1*6. Few of the students knew his or her locker combinations yet.

*1*7. Mathematics must be your favorite subject; you’ve been studying them for hours.

*1*8. Join Students for Bike Trails today at 3:45 when it meets in the cafeteria.

*1*9. One by one, the band got its instruments out of the bus and headed for the field.

*20*. Do any of these pizzas have anchovies on it?

**II/** **Most of the following sentences contain errors in agreement. Cross out each incorrect verb or pronoun form, and write the correct form in the space above the error. If a sentence is already correct, write *C* at the end of the sentence.**

1. Neither the secretary nor the treasurer have been paid.

2. There was still a few questions that had not been answered.

3. The price of diamonds vary from year to year.

4. Each of the girls paid for their own dinner.

5. No one will be excused from physical education classes unless they bring a note signed by a doctor.

6. She is one of those people who dream of changing the world.

7. When’s the primary and the general elections?

8. Our team are playing the Eagles next Sunday on television.

9. Several of the members of last year’s graduating class is enrolled at the University of

Wisconsin.

10. One of the canaries had gotten their foot caught in the cage door.

11. Neither Tien nor her sister appear ready to leave for the concert yet.

12. My English teacher said that ethics might be very interesting for me to study in college. He said that they may be taught in the philosophy department.

13. Nearly one third of the band members carried its instruments in cases to the performance.

14. That bird in the trees don’t look like the ones I have seen before.

15. Most of the recipes appeared to be original. I had never seen them before.

16. The class will go on a field trip to the Museum of Science to do research for its projects.

17. Several of the children ate his or her lunches outside because the weather was so beautiful.

18. Almost every book about insects that Sarah reads contribute to her ever-increasing knowledge

of entomology.

19. Todd explained that the jury would probably take several hours to come to their collective

decision.

20. Either her roommates or her sister are throwing a big surprise party for Samantha.