

Making pronoun references clear

Pronouns substitute for nouns; they are a kind of shorthand. In a sentence like *After Andrew intercepted the ball, he kicked it as hard as he could*, the pronouns *he* and *it* substitute for the nouns *Andrew* and *ball*. The word a pronoun refers to is called its *antecedent*.

Avoid ambiguous or remote pronoun reference.

Ambiguous pronoun reference occurs when a pronoun could refer to two possible antecedents.

- ▶ ~~When Gloria set the pitcher~~ on the glass-topped table, ~~it~~ broke.
The pitcher broke when Gloria set it

- ▶ Tom told James, ~~that he had~~ won the lottery.
"You have"

What broke—the table or the pitcher? Who won the lottery—Tom or James? The revisions eliminate the ambiguity.

Remote pronoun reference occurs when a pronoun is too far away from its antecedent for easy reading.

- ▶ After the court ordered my ex-husband to pay child support, he refused. Approximately eight months later, we were back in court. This time the judge ordered him to make payments directly to the Support and Collections Unit, which would in turn pay me. For the first six months I received regular payments, but then they stopped. Again ~~he~~ was summoned to appear in court; he did not respond.
my ex-husband

The pronoun *he* was too distant from its antecedent, *ex-husband*, which appeared several sentences earlier.

Generally, avoid broad reference of *this*, *that*, *which*, and *it*.

For clarity, the pronouns *this*, *that*, *which*, and *it* should ordinarily refer to specific antecedents rather than to whole ideas or sentences. When a pronoun's reference is needlessly broad, either replace the pronoun with a noun or supply an antecedent to which the pronoun clearly refers.

- ▶ More and more often, especially in large cities, we are finding ourselves victims of serious crimes. We learn to accept ~~this~~ with minor gripes and groans.
our fate

For clarity the writer substituted a noun (*fate*) for the pronoun *this*, which referred broadly to the idea expressed in the preceding sentence.

- ▶ Romeo and Juliet were both too young to have acquired much wisdom, ~~which~~ accounts for their rash actions.
a fact

The writer added an antecedent (*fact*) that the pronoun *which* clearly refers to.

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EXCEPTION: Many writers view broad reference as acceptable when the pronoun refers clearly to the sense of an entire clause.

If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. *This* is the principal difference between a dog and a man. — Mark Twain

Do not use a pronoun to refer to an implied antecedent.

A pronoun should refer to a specific antecedent, not to a word that is implied but not present in the sentence.

- ▶ After braiding Ann's hair, Sue decorated ^{the braids} ~~them~~ with ribbons.

The pronoun *them* referred to Ann's braids (implied by the term *braiding*), but the word *braids* did not appear in the sentence.

Modifiers, such as possessives, cannot serve as antecedents. A modifier may strongly imply the noun that the pronoun might logically refer to, but it is not itself that noun.

- ▶ In ~~Mary Gordon's~~ ^{Mary Gordon} *The Shadow Man*, ~~she~~ writes about her father's mysterious and startling past.

The pronoun *she* cannot refer logically to the possessive modifier *Mary Gordon's*. The revision substitutes the noun *Mary Gordon* for the pronoun *she*, thereby eliminating the problem.

Avoid the indefinite use of *they*, *it*, and *you*.

Do not use the pronoun *they* to refer indefinitely to persons who have not been specifically mentioned. *They* should always refer to a specific antecedent.

- ▶ In 2001, ^{Congress} ~~they~~ shut down all government agencies for more than a month until the budget crisis was finally resolved.

The word *it* should not be used indefinitely in constructions such as *It is said on television . . .* or *In the article it says that. . .*

- ▶ ^{The} ~~In the~~ encyclopedia ~~it~~ states that male moths can smell female moths from several miles away.

The pronoun *you* is appropriate when the writer is addressing the reader directly: *Once you have kneaded the dough, let it rise in a warm place for at least twenty-five minutes.* Except in informal contexts, however, the indefinite *you* (meaning “anyone in general”) is inappropriate.

- ▶ Ms. Pickersgill's *Guide to Etiquette* stipulates that ^{a guest} ~~you~~ should not arrive at a party too early or leave too late.

The writer could have replaced *you* with *one*, but in American English the pronoun *one* can seem stilted.

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To refer to persons, use *who*, *whom*, or *whose*, not *which* or *that*.

In most contexts, use *who*, *whom*, or *whose* to refer to persons, *which* or *that* to refer to animals or things. *Which* is reserved only for animals or things, so it is impolite to use it to refer to persons.

- ▶ When he heard about my seven children, four of ^{whom}~~which~~ live at home, Ron smiled and said, "I love children."

Although *that* is sometimes used to refer to persons, many readers will find such references dehumanizing. It is more polite to use a form of *who* — a word reserved only for people.

NOTE: Occasionally *whose* may be used to refer to animals and things to avoid the awkward *of which* construction.

- ▶ A local school, ^{whose}~~the name of which~~ will be in tomorrow's paper, has received the Governor's Gold Medal for outstanding community service.