

## Making pronouns and antecedents agree

A pronoun is a word that substitutes for a noun. Many pronouns have antecedents, nouns or pronouns to which they refer. A pronoun and its antecedent agree when they are both singular or both plural.

**SINGULAR** Dr. Ava Berto finished *her* rounds.

**PLURAL** The hospital *interns* finished *their* rounds.

### Do not use plural pronouns to refer to singular antecedents.

Writers are frequently tempted to use plural pronouns to refer to two kinds of singular antecedents: indefinite pronouns and generic nouns.

#### Indefinite pronouns

Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things. Even though some of the following indefinite pronouns may seem to have plural meanings, treat them as singular in formal English.

anybody	each	everyone	nobody	somebody
anyone	either	everything	no one	someone
anything	everybody	neither	nothing	something

In class *everyone* performs at *his or her* [not *their*] own fitness level.

When a plural pronoun refers mistakenly to a singular indefinite pronoun, you can usually choose one of three options for revision:

1. Replace the plural pronoun with *he* or *she* (or *his* or *her*).
2. Make the antecedent plural.
3. Rewrite the sentence so that no problem of agreement exists.

- ▶ When someone has been drinking, <sup>*he or she is*</sup> ~~they are~~ likely to speed.
- ▶ When <sup>*drivers have*</sup> ~~someone has~~ been drinking, they are likely to speed.
- ▶ <sup>*A driver who*</sup> ~~When someone~~ has been drinking, <sup>*is*</sup> ~~they are~~ likely to speed.

Because the *he or she* construction is wordy, often the second or third revision strategy is more effective. Be aware that the traditional use of *he* (or *his*) to refer to persons of either sex is now widely considered sexist.

#### Generic nouns

A generic noun represents a typical member of a group, such as a typical student, or any member of a group, such as any lawyer. Although generic nouns may seem to have plural meanings, they are singular.

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Every *runner* must train rigorously if *he or she* wants [not *they* want] to excel.

When a plural pronoun refers mistakenly to a generic noun, you will usually have the same three revision options as just mentioned for indefinite pronouns.

- ▶ A medical student must study hard if ~~they want~~ <sup>he or she wants</sup> to succeed.
- ▶ <sup>Medical students</sup> ~~A medical student~~ must study hard if they want to succeed.
- ▶ A medical student must study hard ~~if they want~~ to succeed.

### Choosing a revision strategy that avoids sexist language

Because many readers object to sexist language, avoid the use of *he*, *him*, and *his* to refer to both men and women. Also try to be sparing in your use of the wordy expressions *he or she* and *his or her*. Where possible, seek out more graceful alternatives.

#### Use an occasional *he or she* (or *his or her*).

- ▶ In our office, everyone works at ~~their~~ <sup>his or her</sup> own pace.

#### Make the antecedent plural.

- ▶ <sup>Employees</sup> ~~An employee~~ on extended leave may continue their life insurance.

#### Recast the sentence.

- ▶ The amount of annual leave a federal worker may accrue depends on ~~their~~ length of service.
- ▶ <sup>A</sup> ~~If a~~ child ~~is~~ born to parents who are both bipolar, <sup>has</sup> ~~they~~ <sup>have</sup> a high chance of being bipolar.
- ▶ A year later someone finally admitted ~~that they were~~ <sup>to being</sup> involved in the kidnapping.
- ▶ I was taught that no one could escape the fires of purgatory. <sup>who wanted to reach heaven</sup> ~~if they wanted to reach heaven.~~

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## Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

Collective nouns such as *jury*, *committee*, *audience*, *crowd*, *class*, *troop*, *family*, *team*, and *couple* name a class or a group. Ordinarily the group functions as a unit, so the noun should be treated as singular; if the members of the group function as individuals, however, the noun should be treated as plural.

- ▶ The jury has reached <sup>its</sup>~~their~~ decision.

There is no reason to draw attention to the individual members of the jury, so *jury* should be treated as singular. Notice also that the writer treated the noun as singular when choosing the verb *has*, so for consistency the pronoun must be *its*.

- ▶ The audience shouted “Bravo” and stamped <sup>their</sup>~~its~~ feet.

It is difficult to see how the audience as a unit can stamp *its* feet. The meaning here is clearly plural, requiring *their*.

## Treat most compound antecedents connected by *and* as plural.

Jill and John moved to Luray, where *they* built a cabin.

## With compound antecedents connected by *or* or *nor* (or by *either . . . or* or *neither . . . nor*), make the pronoun agree with the nearer antecedent.

Either *Bruce* or *Tom* should receive first prize for *his* poem.

Neither the *mouse* nor the *rats* could find *their* way through the maze.

**NOTE:** If one of the antecedents is singular and the other plural, as in the second example, put the plural one last to avoid awkwardness.

**EXCEPTION:** If one antecedent is male and the other female, do not follow the traditional rule. The sentence *Either Bruce or Elizabeth should receive first prize for her short story* makes no sense. The best solution is to recast the sentence: *The prize for best short story should go to Bruce or Elizabeth.*