

#22) Pronoun Pointers

Writers know that a pronoun takes the place of a noun in a sentence and that the noun the pronoun replaces is called an *antecedent*. To work effectively, a pronoun in most cases must have a clear antecedent, and must have the same *gender* and *number* as its antecedent. Using pronouns can be tricky, so here are some trouble spots to watch out for.

1. You shouldn't use pronouns like *this*, *that*, or *which* to refer back to part of a sentence, to an entire sentence, or (good grief!) to an entire paragraph. We call such pronoun use *vague pronoun reference*. Observe the following example.

All employees of the Writing Center are required to clean up their jelly doughnut stains immediately. **This** applies to everyone who works here.

Notice that *this* (in bold) does not have a clear antecedent. A good way to deal with this problem is to add a word that shows specifically what *this* refers to.

All employees of the Writing Center are required to clean up their jelly doughnut stains immediately. **This rule** applies to everyone who works here.

Notice how much clearer and more specific these sentences are after the change. Here's another example:

Carole could not find her coffee cup. **Which** is why she was a little grumpy this morning.

This sentence actually has two problems. One, the writer is using *which* (again in bold) to refer to an entire idea, and we've already seen that you can't use a pronoun in that way. Two, *which* makes the entire second "sentence" a subordinate clause and also, in this case, a fragment. You might edit this sentence in the following way to address both problems.

Carole could not find her coffee cup, so she was a little grumpy this morning.

This edited sentence not only avoids those two problems but also is more concise.

2. Every writer has probably run into the next problem. You're trying to avoid gender bias, so you find yourself writing a sentence like this one:

If **a person** cannot find the Writing Center, **they** should ask Karen for directions.

Notice that *a person* is singular, but *they* is a plural pronoun. Pronouns have to agree with their antecedents in number, so one alternative is to edit the sentence this way:

If **a person** cannot find the Writing Center, **he or she** should ask Karen for directions.

This sentence is grammatically correct, but it probably strikes you as being a little wordy. Can you do something better? Of course you can. Try editing the sentence this way:

If **people** cannot find the Writing Center, **they** should ask Karen for directions.

Both the pronoun and the antecedent are plural, and you've avoided the complicated *he or she* construction—much better.

3. One more reference problem happens when a writer uses an introductory element containing a possessive and then uses a pronoun for the subject. Here's an example:

In **Dwayne's** essay, **he** rambles on incoherently without saying anything important.

What is the problem exactly? The pronoun **he** refers back to **Dwayne's**, but many readers will find this use of the pronoun confusing or awkward. As a rule, personal pronouns do not work well if they refer to an antecedent that is a possessive noun (like **Dwayne's**) or an adjective. A writer might effectively edit the sentence this way:

In **his** essay, **Dwayne** rambles on incoherently without saying anything important.

This edited sentence is much better, especially if the writer is engaged in academic writing.

These examples don't cover all of the pronoun problems that writers run into, but they cover some of the most common ones. Becoming proficient in finding pronoun problems takes practice. You can practice right now. Go back and underline all the pronouns in this handout and see if you can determine what they refer to. If you can't, then the writer of this handout has made a huge mistake.