

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

As one of the eight parts of speech, *pronouns* are words that substitute for nouns (persons, places, or things) or refer back to nouns elsewhere in the sentence. The *antecedent* of a pronoun is the word to which the pronoun refers in a sentence. A pronoun should refer clearly to its antecedent. Just as there must be subject-verb agreement in a sentence, nouns and their corresponding pronouns must agree in person (masculine/feminine) and in number (singular/plural).*

Types and Examples

Personal Pronouns (*he, him, his, she, her, they, them, their, I, me, my, we, us, our, you, your, it, its*)
Personal pronouns refer to or substitute for the name of a person(s) or thing(s). Each of the personal pronouns reflects the grammatical person, gender, number, and case of the noun it replaces. These common pronouns have nominative, objective, and possessive forms of the pronouns based on their antecedents and placement within the sentence structure. (The intensive/reflexive forms of the personal pronouns add the endings “self” or “selves” to the pronoun.)

- The doctor finished **her** rounds, and then **she** headed to radiology for the test results.
- The doctors finished **their** rounds, and then **they** headed to radiology for the test results.

Indefinite Pronouns

(*all, another, any, anybody/anyone, anything, each, everybody/everyone, everything, few, many, nobody, none, one, several, some, somebody/someone*)

An indefinite pronoun does not refer to any specific person or thing. Such pronouns are often used in more broad and vague contexts to reflect general application. Pronoun-antecedent agreement is therefore largely determined by focusing on number (singular or plural).

- When **someone** has been exercising regularly, he or she is (not *they are*) more likely to have lower blood pressure.

Demonstrative Pronouns (*this, that, these, those,*)

A demonstrative pronoun is a pronoun that is used to point to something specific within a sentence.

- As the registrar stamped the transcripts, he stated, “Take **these** to the admissions desk.”

In the case of antecedents that are *collective nouns* (nouns referring to a group of individuals), the neutral personal pronoun “it” is used to achieve agreement.

- The committee granted **its** (not *their*) tentative approval, but **it** delayed final approval until all votes were recounted.

*APA-7 allows for the use of “they” to refer to any person whose preference it is to go by that pronoun. For purposes of academic compliance with APA-7, follow APA style guidelines in this regard, or refer to your discipline’s style guidelines in this area. For the sake of clarity and consistency, we recommend using plural subjects with plural pronouns whenever possible.

Practice

Choose the correct pronoun to agree with its antecedent.

1. Everybody needs to take (their, his or her) dog to the vet regularly.
2. When the dogs go wild, (they, he or she) always mess up the front yard.
3. I get worried when the neighbors let (their, his or her) dog out.
4. If a person plans to succeed in corporate life, (they, he or she) should know the rules of the game.
5. The family gave (their, its) consent to the sale of the company.
6. Jody and Jerry coached (his or her, their) basketball players every day.
7. When drivers have been drinking, (he or she, they) are more likely to speed.
8. Anyone with a family history of heart disease should have (his or her, their) cholesterol checked regularly.
9. The jury announced (its, their) verdict.
10. In this class, everyone performs at (his or her, their) fitness level.

Answers: 1. his or her 2. they 3. their 4. he or she 5. its 6. their 7. they 8. his or her 9. its 10. his or her