Writing and Communication Center

Noun/Pronoun Agreement

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Pronouns and Agreement

- A **pronoun** is a word used in place of a noun.
- The noun it stands for is called the **antecedent**. *Example:* <u>Students</u> *(antecedent)* can learn to improve <u>their</u> *(pronoun)* writing skills by visiting the Writing Center.
- **Agreement** is the matching of pronouns and antecedents, according to number and person.

Why Should Nouns and Pronouns Agree?

Because the secret to good writing is *not* to confuse your reader. If your reader is unsure of who is doing what, you have failed to communicate your idea. Written English differs from spoken English in many ways. One of the most important differences is that readers do not have the advantage of seeing your facial expressions and gestures or hearing your vocal inflections. Instead, they must rely entirely on your written words to understand your ideas. One way to help your readers keep straight who is doing what is for your nouns and pronouns to agree.

Sexist Pronouns

Because singular pronouns (he/she, his/her) are gender-specific, writers need to be wary of producing awkward or misleading text. Writers are often tempted to produce a sentence like the following:

A student must fill out an evaluation form after their conference.

Here a singular antecedent is followed by a plural pronoun to avoid identifying the gender of the subject because the gender is irrelevant to the meaning of the sentence. One alternative is:

Students must fill out an evaluation form after their conference.

Whenever possible, using plural nouns is the most elegant choice, preferable to accompanying the singular noun with the more cumbersome "he or she" or "his or hers." Alternatively, when a singular noun is desirable, writers have the option of alternating between male and female pronouns. The exclusive use of male pronouns, standard practice until recently, neglects half of the population.

Steps to Achieve Agreement in Number

1. Identify the antecedent.
2. Identify whether the antecedent is singular or plural.
3. Match the pronoun to the antecedent. Use the following table as a reference.
   —singular (I/my/me, you/your, he/his/him, she/her, it/its)
   —plural (we/our/us, you/your, they/their/them)

Steps to Achieve Agreement in Person

1. Decide if you are going to write in the first person (I, we), in the second person (you), or in the third person (she, he, it, they, one).
2. Be consistent throughout your paper, checking for agreement between pronouns and antecedents.
3. Again, beware of mismatches between pronouns and antecedents, as occurs in the following example.

   a. *If students try hard enough, you can learn to write clear sentences.*

      Depending on your meaning, this sentence can be revised in the following ways:

      If students try hard enough, they can learn to write clear sentences.
      If you try hard enough, you can learn to write clear sentences.
      If one tries hard enough, one can learn to write clear sentences.

Plural or Singular?

The examples above are fairly straightforward, but there are certain words that make noun-pronoun agreement a little harder to figure out. The easiest way to check for agreement for these words is to memorize them or to keep information like the following lists nearby when you proofread.

Indefinite Pronouns
All of the following words, which by no means form an exhaustive list, are called indefinite pronouns and should be treated as **singular**.

> *Anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, neither, nobody, no one, somebody, someone*

Compound Antecedents
Compound antecedents are usually considered plural when connected by *and*. They are considered **singular** when joined by *or* or *nor*.

> *Examples:*
>> The professor encouraged John and Mary *(compound antecedent)* to video tape their *(pronoun)* presentations.
>>
>> Neither John nor Mary *(compound antecedent)* was excited about video taping his or her *(pronouns)* presentation.

Collective Nouns
When the antecedent is a collective noun (like *audience, student body, committee*), you can use either the singular pronoun or the plural pronoun. If you wish to emphasize the cohesiveness of the group, use a singular pronoun. If, however, you want the reader to focus on the separateness of the individuals, use the plural.

> *Examples:*
>> The audience *(antecedent)* showed its *(pronoun)* approval with thunderous applause.
>>
>> The audience rose to their feet, cheering and whistling.

Sources:
Mulderig, Gerald P., and Langdon Elsbree. *The Heath Handbook*. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1990.