



## PRONOUN AGREEMENT AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Pronouns are helpful because they eliminate repetition. Sometimes, however, pronouns can create difficulties in reading or can even offend some readers if not used carefully.

### Making Pronouns Agree in Number and Gender

We use pronouns to take the place of a word or words in order to eliminate repetition. When using pronouns, though, it is important to make the pronouns agree in number and gender with the original word or words.

Example:

A student who turns in their paper on time should receive a good grade.

In this example, the plural pronoun “their” does not match the singular subject “a student.” To correct the sentence, you can either change the pronoun to “his or her” or change the subject to “students.” An easy way to check for this particular pronoun agreement is to place the word “their” in your computer’s FIND function (in Microsoft Word, it’s under the Edit menu) and verify each time you use the word “their,” it refers to a plural subject. Also, check for the words “they” and “them.”

### Avoiding Vague References

Make sure the pronouns you use do not create confusion.

Examples:

**Wrong:** When Sheila saw Betty, she smiled.

**Right:** Sheila smiled when she saw Betty.

**Wrong:** They say one shouldn’t sleep for an hour after a head injury.

**Right:** According to superstition, one shouldn’t sleep for an hour after a head injury.

The first example is not the best way to word the sentence because “she” could refer to either Sheila or Betty.

The second example shows a more concrete way to word the sentence and avoid any possible confusion.

The third example, though a fairly common way of referring to an unknown person or group, is incorrect because it does not refer to anyone in particular. This belies the purpose of pronouns.

The fourth example is reworded to eliminate the vague pronoun “they” and better express the origin of the statement.

## Words That Take Singular Pronouns

We often mistakenly use plural pronouns with singular subjects.

Examples:

**Wrong:** Why does everyone take themselves so seriously?

**Wrong:** Why does everyone take him/herself so seriously?

**Right:** Why do people take themselves so seriously?

The first example is incorrect because of a disagreement in number. The pronoun “themselves” is being used to take the place of another pronoun, “everyone.” These two, however, do not agree in number because “everyone” is singular and “themselves” is plural.

The second example is correct in number, but some feel that the slash creates confusion in the reading or is awkward at best.

The final example is the best solution. The entire sentence is changed to plural, thus eliminating all errors and possible confusion.

If pronouns are intended to be specific in gender or number, use the proper pronoun gender or number.

Example:

The woman who was standing next to me left her coat.

The following words are considered singular subjects and they always take singular pronouns and verbs:

### Commonly Confused Subjects

- anybody
- group
- audience
- jury
- crowd
- no one
- each
- nobody
- every person
- none
- everybody
- somebody
- everyone
- some person
- family
- team