

PRONOUN REFERENCE: THE ANTECEDENT

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An antecedent is the noun to which a pronoun refers. A pronoun gains meaning only through its antecedent. Because you want your writing to be clear, it is important that your pronouns have an antecedent, and that the reference to the antecedent be recognizable.

VAGUE ANTECEDENTS: When you use pronouns, be sure they refer to a specific noun and that the reference is clear. Pronouns usually refer to the closest preceding noun, but sometimes that relationship can be confusing. Review the following examples of the relationship

Incorrect Example: Paul told Jake he had a test on Friday.

Who has the test? Is it Paul or Jake? Do we really know?

Correct Example: Paul told Jake, “**You** have a test on Friday.”

OR

Paul told Jake that **Jake** had a test on Friday.

Now we know that Jake has the test! Often, we must repeat the noun in order to avoid a pronoun error.

Incorrect Example: The debate between Paul and Jake began when he made the decision to give up smoking.

Who gave up smoking? Was it Paul or Jake?

Correct Example: The debate between Paul and Jake began when **Jake** made the decision to give up smoking

Now it is quite clear who quit smoking, isn't it?

MISSING ANTECEDENTS: Watch out for no antecedent at all! Sometimes, we write pronouns that do not refer to any noun. This is called a missing antecedent.

Incorrect Example: Paul was an artist, but he never sold any of them.

Paul never sold what? Drawings, paintings, sculptures? The pronoun **them** has no antecedent; it does not refer to any noun.

Correct Example: Paul was an artist, but he never sold any of his **paintings**.

Special points to remember about pronoun reference:

1. Avoid using pronouns that are particularly vague- **it**, **they**, and **you**. People tend to overuse these pronouns in speech and seldom state the noun to which they refer. You may have heard people say, “What are they wearing this year?” in reference to the new styles from the fashion industry. But, of course, we really have no idea to whom “they” refers. Notice how the following sentences are improved when a clarifying noun is added to replace the vague pronouns.

Example: **It** says on the label that this medicine has no side effects.

Correct Example: **The bottle label states** that this medicine has no side effects.

At this point, you may be tempted to think that being so specific is being very picky. However, the more specific we become in speech and writing, the more we avoid miscommunication. Additionally, many professions, such as engineering, law, and medicine, are dependent on specificity. “Almost right” or “you know what I mean” doesn’t work in these professions. Look at one more example.

Example: On our bus route, **they** arrive at strange hours.

Corrected Example: **The buses** on our route arrive at strange hours.

2. Never shift from one pronoun form to another in the same sentence. Pronouns are classified as first person, second person, or third person. Avoid shifting from one person to another, such as a shift from first person to third person.

Example: **We** have reached the point where **one** must make a decision.

Do you see the pronoun problem in this sentence? The first person pronoun, **we**, shifted to the third person pronoun, **one**. Not only does the pronoun shift sound awkward, it leaves unanswered who is to make the decision. The corrected version clarifies who should make the decision.

Corrected Example: **We** have reached the point where **we** must make a decision.

3. Avoid using the second person pronoun “you” in formal writing. Using a noun and the third person pronoun--he, she, it, they, and them--clarifies the meaning of the sentence.

Example: In this school, **you** can choose your instructors.

Corrected Example: In this school, **students** can choose **their** instructors.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1: Correct the vague or faulty pronoun references by rewriting the following sentences. Suggested answers are in the back of this packet.

1. The manager told us it was not for sale.
2. When we stopped at Burger King, the clerk said he didn't have any.
3. Paul loves books and thinks it is an exciting hobby.
4. Cathy was very upset with Claire, and she looked miserable.
5. Lee wanted to go to the art show with Jake, but he arrived too late.
6. The students could not agree with the teachers because they were narrow-minded.
7. My mother, my cousin, and I were talking, and she started talking about her boyfriend.
8. Every time Pavlov set out his dog's food, he would salivate.
9. Skiing is exciting, but they often have accidents which result in broken bones.
10. Janice asked Paula to invite her boyfriend to the Saturday night dance.

EXERCISE 2: Correct the vague or faulty pronoun references by rewriting the following sentences. Suggested answers are in the back of this packet.

1. Gold would be more enjoyable for me if I could just hit it.
2. He was told that the class was not full, so you could register for it.
3. As soon as Dean gets paid, he spends it.
4. Pam told her roommate she didn't have any more fudge.
5. In yesterday's paper it says the school board meeting was canceled.
6. When John and Paul got to the parking lot, they found that his car was missing.

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7. The dishwasher leaked, and it ran all over the floor.
8. Remove the flower from the sweater and wash it.
9. They did not bother to include the students' requests.
10. If the children don't like the gifts, give them away.
11. She has gone into business for yourself.
12. Jan met Pam when she began her studies at FCCJ.
13. When the spaceship reached Pluto, it could no longer be tracked.
14. The rain melted the snow; this caused flooding.
15. The students began to take the test which seemed like a good idea.

Answers

Exercise 1: Since there are a number of ways to rewrite these sentences, your answers may vary; however, each pronoun should have a clear noun to which it refers.

1. The manager told us that the car was not for sale.
2. When we stopped at Burger King, the clerk said he didn't have any ketchup.
3. Paul loves books and thinks reading is an exciting hobby.
4. Cathy, who looked miserable, was very upset with Claire.
5. Lee wanted to go to the art show with Jake, but Lee arrived too late.
6. The students could not agree with the narrow-minded teachers.
7. My mother, my cousin, and I were talking, and my cousin started talking about her boyfriends.
8. Every time Pavlov set out his dog's food, the dog would salivate.
9. Skiing is exciting, but skiers often have accidents which result in broken bones.
10. Janice asked Paula to invite Paula's boyfriend to the Saturday night dance.

Exercise 2:

1. Panning for gold would be more enjoyable for me if I could just discover some gold nuggets.
2. Dan was told that the class was not full, so he could register for it.
3. As soon as Dean gets paid, he spends his money.
4. Pam told her roommate that Pam didn't have any more fudge.
5. Yesterday's paper says that the school board meeting was canceled.

6. When John and Paul got to the parking lot, they found that John's car was missing.
7. The dishwasher leaked, and water ran all over the floor.
8. Remove the flower from the sweater before washing it.
9. The school administration did not bother to include the students' requests.
10. If the children don't like their gifts, give the gifts away.
11. She has gone into business for herself.
12. Jan met Pam when Jan began her studies at FCCJ.
13. When the spaceship reached Pluto, its path could no longer be tracked.
14. The rain melted the snow, which caused flooding.
15. The students thought it was a good idea to begin to take the test.

Websites for Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/pronouns1.htm>

Good information from Capitol Community College on exactly what is meant by pronoun and antecedent agreement.

<http://wwwnew.towson.edu/ows/indexexercises.htm>

Towson Education Online Exercises –Practice Pronoun/antecedent agreement.