Aggie Grammar Guide: Pronouns

Pronouns are a small class of words that substitute for a noun or refer to a nearby noun. Pronouns cannot be preceded by articles or determiners. Using pronouns greatly helps with concision and clarity.

➢ <u>Example without pronouns</u>: Long-Solis and Vargas explain that corn is not just used as an ingredient. Long-Solis and Vargas show how corn is considered a blessing or holy because of the value corn has.

➢ <u>Example with pronouns</u>: Long-Solis and Vargas explain that corn is not just used as an ingredient. **They** show how corn is considered a blessing or holy because of the value **it** has.

Pronoun use

The previous example illustrates one of the main uses of pronouns—to refer to an *antecedent*. An antecedent is the word(s) in a nearby phrase that the pronoun logically stands for as shorthand. In other words, the pronoun gets its meaning based on the antecedent it is matched to ("they" refers to "Long-Solis and Vargas" in this example, but in other sentences, **they** would refer to something else). The antecedent often comes before the pronoun in the sentence, but not necessarily. Regardless of where the antecedent is, what a pronoun refers to must be obvious to the reader. If you're unsure, ask yourself what a pronoun means to check if there is a clear antecedent.

➢ <u>Example</u>: After **they** show how corn is considered a blessing or holy, <u>Long-Solis and Vargas</u> explain the value it has.

The other main use of pronouns doesn't require an antecedent. Words like **I**, **you**, **this**, and **that** get their meaning from context but not necessarily from a prior noun phrase.

➢ <u>Example</u>: Because **we** are all affected by the college ranking system, **our** decisions for college sometimes might not be what **we** actually want.

Pronoun types

There are numerous types of pronouns: (1) *personal*, (2) *reciprocal*, (3) *demonstrative*, (4) *relative*, (5) *interrogative*, and (6) *indefinite/quantifier*. The following chart illustrates the first type of pronoun, as *personal* pronouns are the only type to have different inflectional forms for case (subject, object, possessive, reflexive), number (singular, plural), and gender (masculine, feminine, neutral).

(1) Personal

Number	Person	Gender	Subject	Object	Possessive	Reflexive
Singular	First		I	me	mine	myself
	Second		you	you	yours	yourself
	Third	Masculine	he	him	his	himself
		Feminine	she	her	hers	herself
		Neutral	it	it	Ø	itself
Plural	First		we	us	ours	ourselves
	Second		you	you	yours	yourselves
	Third		they	them	theirs	themselves

You may have noticed that the words **my**, **your**, **his**, **her**, **its**, **our**, and **their** were not included in the chart above in the possessives column. While these words are possessives and may look like pronouns, they are technically not pronouns, but rather determiners. Determiners, like articles, precede nouns while pronouns replace them.

- ➢ Example of determiner: Although financial aid helps me cover **my** tuition, I still feel worried about the cost of college at UC Davis. (The determiner "my" precedes the noun "tuition," like the word **the** would do.)
- ➢ Example of pronoun: Although my friends' tuition is paid by their parents, financial aid helps me cover **mine**. (The pronoun "mine" replaces the noun phrase "my tuition.")

When using the reflexive form, note that there are two different meanings: *complement* and *emphatic*. The reflexive pronoun is a complement when the sentence requires an object and the subject and object refer to the same person/thing. The emphatic use of the reflexive pronoun is optional; it adds clarity to emphasize whom the verb applies to, but the grammar doesn't require the pronoun to be there.

- ➢ Example (complement): I suppose that Vanessa's mom saw **herself** in her daughter. (Vanessa's mom needed to see *something*, so the word "herself" is required. If the form were **her** instead of **herself**, the reader would think that **her** referred to a different woman, not Vanessa's mom.)
- ➢ Example (emphatic): Making tough choices helps students stay in college because by making the tough choices **themselves**, the students are more likely to succeed. (The sentence sounds fine without the word "themselves"; it is not obligatory. However, its use helps emphasize that the students are making their *own* choices.) Although this and other emphatic examples don't *replace* a noun, they do *refer* to a noun and have an antecedent.

Unlike the personal pronouns, the other pronoun types have a single form that doesn't vary by person or gender.

(2) Reciprocal (each other, one another [both singular])

Both of these pronouns mean the same thing. Similar to the reflexive pronouns, reciprocal pronouns are also used when the subject and object refer to the same person/thing. But here, the action is done among participants in a category. Thus, the noun that the pronoun refers to is always plural.

➢ Example: Letting colleges rank **each other** would lead to a biased result because colleges do not know anything about the others, and they also compete against **one another**.

(3) Demonstrative (this [singular], these [plural of this], that [singular], those [plural of that])

These words can occur as both pronouns and determiners, similar to the case of **mine** vs. **my** above. However, with the demonstratives, their pronoun and determiner forms look identical.

➢ Example of determiner: **This** experience made me realize the inevitable truth of unjust behavior affecting minorities first hand in today's society. (The determiner "this" precedes the noun "experience," like the word **the** would do.)

➢ Example of pronoun: **This** made me realize the inevitable truth of unjust behavior affecting minorities first hand in today's society. (The pronoun "this" replaces the noun phrase "this experience.")

(4) Relative (who, whom, whose, which, that [don't vary by number])

Relative pronouns are used to make relative clauses. Like the personal pronouns, they have different case forms (subject, object, possessive). See the Relative Clause chapter for more information.

➢ Example: Amanda, **who** works at an old Christian church, is a senior nun.

(5) Interrogative (**who**, **whom**, **whose**, **which**, **what** [don't vary by number]). Interrogative words introduce questions. You can see above that the first four of the five interrogative pronouns also function as relative pronouns.

➢ Example: **What** do you expect your life will be in college?

(6) Indefinite/Quantifier

(**some**, **someone**, **somebody**, **something**, **any**, **anyone**, **anybody**, **anything**, **none, no one**, **nobody**, **nothing**, **each**, **everyone**, **everybody**, **everything**, **both**, **all**, **much**, **many**, **most**, **more**, **several**, **others**, **enough**, **few**, **less**, **little**, **either**, **neither**). Indefinite/quantifier pronouns have a non-specific meaning and/or indicate amounts. The above pronouns ending in **-one**, **-body**, and **-thing** are singular. The Subject Verb Agreement chapter lists whether the other pronouns are singular, plural, or either.

➢ Example: In this section, the writers include information to build upon their knowledge of chemistry. There isn't **any** left out as every classification is important. (The pronoun "any" is singular because it replaces the singular noun "information.")

The next sections cover some common difficulties with using pronouns.

Who vs. whom

The distinction between **who** and **whom** is often difficult to notice because **whom** often gets replaced with **who** in spoken English. The same pattern is true for **whoever** replacing **whomever**. Many English speakers overuse **who** in place of **whom** without realizing it but will deem it incorrect when **whom** is overused. If you are writing formally and want to correctly use **who** vs. **whom**, note that **who** is the subject form while **whom** is the object form. To see additional sentences with **who** and **whom**, check out the Relative Clauses chapter.

A simple test can determine whether **who/whoever** or **whom/whomever** is correct: look to see what word follows. If a verb follows, then use **who/whoever**. If a noun follows, then use **whom/whomever**.

- ➢ Example: The school should consider the majority of the students **who** <u>are</u> healthy and don't need other people to force them to get active. ("who" is correct because a verb follows)
- ➢ Example: The school should consider the majority of the students **whom** <u>other people</u> unnecessarily force to get active. ("whom" is correct because a noun follows)

Incidentally, this test works for any subject vs. object pair from the chart above, including **I** vs. **me**.

I vs. me

In standard, formal English, **I** is a subject pronoun and **me** is an object pronoun. That means that sentences like "Two girls who were sitting next to us might have understood my friend and I" are incorrect because the first person pronoun ("I") is the object of the verb "understood," thus "I" needs to be "me." The difference between **I** and **me** is the same difference as with the other subject and object personal pronouns from the chart above (**he/him**, **she/her**, **we/us**, **they/them**).
An easy test to check the pronoun form within a phrase is to remove the noun so you're left with just the pronoun.

- ➢ Example: *Two girls who were sitting next to us might have understood **my friend and I**.
- ➢ Test: *Two girls who were sitting next to us might have understood **I**.
- ➢ Revision: Two girls who were sitting next to us might have understood **my friend and me**.

While following the above rule and test will ensure that your writing follows academic English conventions, you may notice that not everyone applies this rule in spoken, conversational English. It is common to hear utterances like "Two girls might have understood my friend and I" and "My friends and me were gossiping in Japanese." Just note that these are different varieties of English, following different pronoun rules.

Agreement and consistency

Pronoun confusion can occur when a pronoun does not match its antecedent in person, number, and/or gender or when there are multiple pronouns/nouns in a single sentence and the reader loses track of what the pronouns refer to. When the antecedent is singular, the pronoun should be singular; when the antecedent is plural, the pronoun should be plural. You may hear inconsistent pronouns in speech, but in writing our goal is to be especially clear and logical, so pronouns should clearly match the noun they refer to. Additionally, if a pronoun's antecedent is unclear, rearrange the sentence, opt for the noun instead of the pronoun, or remove the pronoun altogether. The following sentence demonstrates an unclear pronoun reference with use of **it**. The only singular noun is "public opinion," but it doesn't make sense logically for public opinion to be a type of civil participation. If "it" refers to "philanthropic associations" instead, then the pronoun should be revised to be "they" or removed.

> ➢ Illogical example: Only the philanthropic associations were successful in public opinion and that is because **it** was "a type of civil participation, though often self-generated, embodying the same values and devotion to hierarchy as the regime" (Engelstein 72).
> ➢ Revised example to show agreement: Only the philanthropic associations were successful in public opinion and that is because **they were** "a type of civil participation, though often self-generated, embodying the same values and devotion to hierarchy as the regime" (Engelstein 72).
> ➢ Revised example to remove pronoun: Public opinion considered only philanthropic associations successful as "a type of civil participation, though often self-generated, embodying the same values and devotion to hierarchy as the regime" (Engelstein 72).

In the next example, the pronoun matches the noun in number but needs to be revised to match the noun in person. **"We"** is a first person pronoun, but the noun "students" is third person.

> ➢ Illogical example: Every time students have questions or doubts, **we** ask after the lecturer finishes.
> ➢ Revised example: Every time students have questions or doubts, **they** ask after the lecturer finishes.

Singular they

One common difficulty with pronoun agreement is the lack of a singular, generic, non-gendered English pronoun to refer to people. In informal writing, and certainly in speaking, singular **they/them/theirs** is often used. But in formal writing, using singular **they** has usually been deemed incorrect:

> ➢ "Incorrect" example: I feel that if a student makes the "tough choices," **they** will learn how to make the right decisions for **their** education.

This once-strict rule is slowly changing, and style manuals are starting to accept singular **they** in writing. In 2017, style guides such as the Associate Press Stylebook and the Chicago Manual of Style revised their rules but still treat generic **they** as different than non-gendered **they.** Generic **they** is exemplified above; this is when the subject is not named (like "a student," or "someone"). These style guides allow for generic **they** if it's unavoidable but still recommend revising the sentence. Traditional revisions

methods would change the pronoun to **he**, **she**, **he/she**, or **s/he.** But most preferable is to make the antecedent plural ("If <u>students</u> make the 'tough choices,' they will learn…") or take out the pronoun altogether because these options avoid gendered pronouns that are not inclusive.

This issue of non-inclusive gendered pronouns is what motivates a different rule for non-gendered **they**. Some individuals prefer **they/them/theirs** as their personal pronouns precisely because these words don't denote gender, and a binary gender at that. In these situations, style manuals advocate for following people's preferred pronouns. [Click this link from the UC Davis LGBTQIA Resource Center to learn more about preferred uses.](#)

> ➢ <u>Example</u>: I feel that if <u>Sam</u> makes the "tough choices," **they** will learn how to make the right decisions for **their** education. (In this example, Sam prefers **they**/**them**/**theirs** pronouns and determiners).

It

As we've already established, **it** is the third person singular neutral personal pronoun. Some confusion often arises between **its** (possessive determiner) and **it's** (contraction). See the Apostrophes chapter for a fuller explanation.

Sometimes **it** acts as a *dummy subject*, which is a pronoun that needs to be there because sentences require something in that place, but it is not the logical subject. Common academic phrases that use *dummy it* are **it is likely…**, **it is necessary…**, and **it is logical…**.

> ➢ <u>Incorrect example</u>: The publication uses the difference of color and arrangement for different kinds of writings so that <u>readers can easier</u> to identify the particular category of the writings while they are reading. (This sentence is incorrect because people can't be easy, unless you're using a different, colloquial meaning of "easy." If you're unsure, check a dictionary to see which adjectives can logically describe which nouns.)
> ➢ <u>Revision</u>: The publication uses the difference of color and arrangement for different kinds of writing so that **it is easier for readers** to identify the particular category of the writings while they are reading.

While grammatical, the *dummy it* phrase can often be revised for concision. Ask yourself if the phrase is adding any necessary meaning to your sentence.

> ➢ <u>Example</u>: <u>It is commonly believed that</u> good grades make some college international students become more successful than others.
> ➢ <u>Revision</u>: Good grades presumably make some college international students become more successful than others.

Sentences with question word order

Question words, including the interrogative pronouns (**who**, **whom**, **whose**, **which**), begin questions.

- ➢ Example: **What** is a hybrid automobile?

In academic writing, it can be helpful to embed a simple question within a larger declarative sentence because presenting a question as a statement is more formal in tone.

- ➢ Incorrect example: I want to learn more about **what** is a hybrid automobile.
- ➢ Revision: I want to learn more about **what** a hybrid automobile is.

Note that the first example is dispreferred in academic English because the question word order remains. The second example rearranges the word order to fit a sentence word order.

When a question lacks a question word (and uses a helping verb instead to begin the question), inserting the words **if** or **whether** can help convert the question into a statement.

- ➢ Example: Should all schoolchildren in the state be vaccinated in order to attend school?
- ➢ Revision: According to an article in the Davis newspaper by Judy Lin, there's a big debate about **if** schoolchildren should be vaccinated in order to attend school.

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