

Pronouns-Antecedent Agreement

And Floating Pronouns

Terms and Concepts

- **Basic Principle:** A pronoun usually refers to something earlier in the text (its antecedent) and must agree in number – singular/plural – with the thing to which it refers.
- **Antecedent:** (An-te-ce-dent) the word to which a pronoun refers.
- **Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement:** A pronoun and its antecedent are in agreement if they are BOTH singular or BOTH plural.

Pronouns

- I, me, my, mine
- You, yours, your
- He, him, his, she, her, hers, it, its
- We, us, our, ours
- They, them, their, theirs

Easy Example

- Martha Stewart autographed many books at her book signing.
- “Martha Stewart” is the antecedent for the pronoun “her.” The pronoun “her” must match “Martha Stewart” in terms of gender and number.
 - Since Martha Stewart is one woman, the singular feminine pronoun “her” is correct.

Compound Antecedents, “And”

When a pronoun refers to a compound antecedent linked by the word “and,” both parts of the antecedent should be added together. The pronoun will consequently be plural.

EX:

- **James and John** did an excellent job in **their** sales pitch.
 - James is one person, and John is another. $1 + 1 = 2$. As such, the plural pronoun “their” is correct.

Compound Antecedents, “Or”

However, when a pronoun refers to a compound antecedent joined with the word “or,” the parts of the compound antecedent should be counted separately.

If you think about it, this makes sense – “or” means that you have one OR the other. You don’t have both.

EX:

- James or John lost his jacket.
- James is one person, and John is one person. Taken separately, you have only one person or the other person. But you don’t have two people.

Wrinkle

What do you do when you have a compound antecedent joined with “or,” and one of the parts of the antecedent is plural, and the other part is singular?

EX:

- James or the twins will drive (his/their) cars in the parade.

ANSWER:

- Match the pronoun to whatever part of the antecedent is closest.
- James or the twins will drive their cars in the parade.

Each, every, everybody, somebody

These words are singular. Whenever you see them, the pronoun must be singular as well.

EX:

- **Everybody** in the building was instructed to leave through the exit on **his or her** right.
- **Each** of them does a good deal of work at **his or her** desk.
 - “Them” sounds plural, but notice that “them” is not the antecedent. “Each of them” is the antecedent.
 - A trick: whenever you see the word “each,” say “each one” in your head. Saying “each one of them,” makes it obvious that the pronoun needs to be singular.
- **Somebody** has left **his or her** bag on the floor

Uncountable vs. Countable Objects

When the object of the preposition is uncountable, a singular pronoun is used.

- Some of the sugar fell out of its bag.
 - Granted, we realize that there are many grains of sugar that fell out of the bag. But it's impossible (practically, at least) to count all the grains of sugar. As such, we consider sugar to be a single collective.
- All of the jewelry has lost its glow.
 - Same here – jewelry is a singular collective. Bear in mind, though, that had the sentences said “jewels” instead of “jewelry,” it would be a different story.

Floating Pronouns

Beware the floating pronoun! In English grammar, all pronouns must refer back to a specific antecedent.

EX:

- Although Mrs. Smith was wealthy, she made poor use of it.
 - **WRONG** – does Mrs. Smith make poor use of her “wealthy”? No – she makes poor use of her wealth. But the sentence never says “wealth.” “Wealth” and “wealthy” are two separate words.
- Although Mrs. Smith was wealthy, she made poor use of her money.
 - **RIGHT** – we’ve replaced the floating pronoun with a noun.

Floating Pronouns, cont.

Right or Wrong?

- Janet worked hard as a weather station meteorologist. She was ecstatic when she got **it**.
 - **WRONG** -- What is the “it” that she got? We can infer that she got some sort of promotion or raise, but the sentence never actually tells us.
- **They** say the SAT is easier than it used to be.
 - **WRONG** – Who says?