

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

And Floating Pronouns

Terms and Concepts

- **Pronoun:** A word that takes the place of a noun.
- **Antecedent:** The noun to which the pronoun refers.
- **Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement:** A pronoun must match its antecedent in terms of gender and number (singular.
 - For instance, if the antecedent noun is feminine (e.g., “Martha”), the pronoun must also be feminine (“she,” “her,” or “hers”).
 - Likewise, if the antecedent noun is singular (“the man”), the pronoun must also be singular (“he,” “him,” or “his”). On the other hand, if the antecedent noun is plural (“the men”), the pronoun must be plural (“they,” “them,” or “their”).

Common 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 a woman, the pronoun must be feminine (“her,” not “his”).
 - Likewise, since Martha Stewart is one person, the pronoun must be singular (“her,” not “their”).

Compound Antecedents, “And”

A “compound antecedent” is a two-noun antecedent. In other words, the pronoun refers back to two nouns.

When a pronoun refers to two nouns 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 thing OR the other. You don’t have both things.

EX:

- James or John lost his jacket.
- James is one person, and John is one person. The jacket belongs to one or the other, but not to both. The pronoun is singular because only one person (James or John) owns the jacket.

Wrinkle

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

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 to the pronoun. Since “twins” is closest, the pronoun should match “twins.”
- “Twins” is a plural noun. Accordingly, the pronoun should be plural.
- 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/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 sentence said “jewels” instead of “jewelry,” a plural pronoun would have been required.

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 not the same 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 to advance 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 advancement, but the sentence never actually uses these words. Again, “to advance” and “advancement” are not the same words.
- **They** say the SAT is easier than it used to be.
 - **WRONG** – Who says?