

## Getting Them Right: Why, When, and How to Use Pronouns

### Definition

A pronoun replaces a noun used previously in a sentence or paragraph. Types of pronouns include the following:

- **personal** (I/you/he/she/it/we/they/me/my/your/yours, etc.)
- **demonstrative** (this/that/these/those/such)
- **relative** (who/which/that)
- **indefinite** (everybody/anybody/somebody/all/each/every/some/none/one)
- **indefinite relative** (whoever/whomever/whatever)
- **reflexive** (myself/yourself/themselves, etc.)
- **interrogative** (who/which/what)
- **reciprocal** (each other/one another)

### Why to use a pronoun

A properly used pronoun will improve the flow of your writing and help eliminate awkward and redundant prose. For instance, rather than writing, “Matt said to Matt’s mother, ‘Matt needs a new car,’” you might write, “Matt said to his mother, ‘I need a new car.’”

### When to use a pronoun

A pronoun should be used when it is clear which noun it is replacing. This noun is known as the *antecedent*. If it is not immediately clear what antecedent a pronoun replaces, do not use the pronoun.

- **POOR:** “The caterer prepared the main course and the dessert. It was delicious.” Does *it* refer to the main course or the dessert?
- **BETTER:** “The caterer prepared the main course and a delicious dessert.”

### How to use a pronoun

A pronoun should agree in number and case with its antecedent—i.e. a singular pronoun replaces a singular noun and a masculine/feminine/neuter pronoun replaces a masculine/feminine/neuter noun.

- **POOR:** “Each of the control mice ate *their* carrots.” It is incorrect to replace the singular pronoun *each* with the plural pronoun *their*.
- **BETTER:** “Each of the control mice ate *its* carrots.”

Avoid shifting from one pronoun to another without reason. The most common pronoun shift errors exchange *you*, *I*, and *one*:

- POOR: “If *one* takes out a loan for college, *you* must repay *your* debts.”
- BETTER: “Students who take out loans for college must repay *their* debts.”

If the pronoun creates ambiguity, use the antecedent instead of the pronoun or rephrase the sentence to circumvent the problem entirely.

- POOR: “Gerry asked Jeremy if *he* could sub for *him*.” It is unclear whether *he/him* refers to Gerry or Jeremy.
- BETTER: “Gerry asked Jeremy to sub for *him*” or “Gerry asked to sub for Jeremy.” The first revision still uses the pronoun *him*, but the change from conditional to infinitive verb clarifies the sentence.

Beware confusing the subject and object form of pronouns, as in *I* versus *me*:

- POOR: “He gave the rabbit to Claire and *I*.” *I* is a subject, but the pronoun here needs to answer the question, “To whom was the rabbit given?”
- BETTER: “He gave the rabbit to Claire and *me*. Later, Kate and *I* set it free.” *Me* is the object. In the second sentence, *I* is used correctly as a subject.

### **Additional resources**

#### *Using nonsexist language*

A common problem with pronoun usage results from attempts to use nonsexist language. Much of this difficulty can be avoided by using plural nouns and pronouns. Some specific and clear “Guidelines for Nonsexist Language” are available from the Society of Music Theory at <http://societymusictheory.org/search/node/sexist>.

#### *Types and Functions of Pronouns*

Pronouns serve specific functions. The Capital Community College Foundation’s “Guide to Grammar and Writing” has a thorough overview of these functions at <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/pronouns1.htm>.