

INSTRUCTOR: Pronoun antecedent agreement.

Pronouns take the place of nouns. "The boy left the boy's coat on the field" is awkward. Using a pronoun is smoother. In this case, the pronoun "his" refers back to the noun "boy," which is called an antecedent, meaning thing that comes before.

A pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent. That is, it must be singular if the antecedent is singular. Likewise, plural antecedents require plural pronouns. "The students took their seats." In this case, "students" is the antecedent and "their" is the pronoun. They are both plural, so they agree.

Problems with pronoun-antecedent agreement commonly occur in three instances--when the antecedent represents a whole group or class, when the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun, and when the antecedent is a collective noun. Let's take a look at each trouble spot in turn.

Watch for antecedents that represent a whole group of people or class of objects, such as a student. These words might be used to refer to students in general. But if they are written as singular nouns, they take singular pronouns. "A student needs to do their best to get a good grade." Even though the word "student" refers to students in general, it is a singular noun and the pronoun that refers to it must also be singular.

"A student needs to do his or her best to get a good grade." The sentence is now correct because the singular noun "student" agrees with the singular pronoun combination "his or her." Another way to correct the mistake is to make the noun plural to match the plural pronoun. "Students need to do their best to get a good grade." Now both noun and pronoun are plural, so the sentence is correct.

Watch for antecedents that are singular indefinite pronouns, such as "anyone" and "everybody." Even though these words may sound plural, they are singular, so they should be used only with singular pronouns. "Everybody wants to see their grades

before the weekend." "Everybody" is a singular indefinite pronoun, but "their" is plural, so the sentence is incorrect.

"Everybody wants to see his or her grade before the weekend." The sentence is now correct because the singular indefinite pronoun "everybody" agrees with the singular pronoun combination "his or her." A second option is to replace "everybody" with a plural noun to match the plural pronoun "their." "All students want to see their grades before the weekend." the sentence is now correct because the plural noun "all students" agrees with the plural pronoun "their."

Watch for collective nouns, such as "company" and "family," that may sound plural but are usually singular. They should be used only with singular pronouns. "The family donated their car to charity." "Family" is a singular collective noun, but "their" is plural, so the sentence is incorrect. "The family donated its car to charity." The sentence is now correct because the singular collective noun "family" agrees with the singular pronoun "its."

Pronouns are useful tools, but they can cause confusion if used incorrectly. Avoiding problems with pronoun-antecedent agreement will make you a stronger writer.