Pronouns

A pronoun is used in place of a noun. Different forms are used to show person, number, gender, and case. There are personal, interrogative, indefinite, demonstrative, and reflexive pronouns.

- **A personal pronoun** refers to one or more individuals or things. Personal pronouns may be in the nominative, objective or possessive case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Nominative (used in the place of a subject)</th>
<th>Objective (used after verbs)</th>
<th>Possessive (as an adjective)</th>
<th>Possessive (as a pronoun)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>my</td>
<td>mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your</td>
<td>yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person masculine</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>him</td>
<td>his</td>
<td>his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person feminine</td>
<td>she</td>
<td>her</td>
<td>her</td>
<td>hers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person gender-neutral*</td>
<td>they*</td>
<td>them*</td>
<td>theirs</td>
<td>theirs*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person inanimate</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>its</td>
<td>its</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See reverse side of this handout, “Pronoun/antecedent agreement”

- **A relative pronoun** introduces a relative clause, relating groups of words to nouns or other pronouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Nominative</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Possessive (as an adjective)</th>
<th>Possessive (as a pronoun)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>our</td>
<td>ours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your</td>
<td>yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>them</td>
<td>their</td>
<td>theirs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example:  

\[I \text{ took my sister to her doctor.}\]  
\[She \text{ gave us a new table for our kitchen.}\]

- **An interrogative pronoun** is used to ask a question. Interrogative pronouns include: who, whom, whose, what, and which.

  For example:  

\[Who \text{ left the light on?}\]  
\[Which \text{ book is yours?}\]

- **A relative pronoun** introduces a relative clause, relating groups of words to nouns or other pronouns.

  For example:  

\[Matt \text{ was the one who built the picnic table.}\]  
\[The house, which has a garden in bloom, is very inviting.\]

- **An indefinite pronoun** refers to a general person or thing. Singular indefinite pronouns include: one, each either, neither, everyone, no one, anybody, somebody, nobody, everybody, anyone, and someone. Plural indefinite pronouns include: several, both, many, and few.

  For example:  

\[No one \text{ has a good idea for the workshop. (singular)}\]  
\[Many \text{ go on vacation in August. (plural)}\]

The indefinite pronouns some, none, all, most, and any can be singular or plural depending on the meaning of the sentence.
For example: Some of the work is done. (singular)
Some of the marks come off easily. (plural)

- A **demonstrative pronoun** identifies or points out a noun. The demonstrative pronouns include: that, this, these, those, and such.

  For example:
  
  This is more expensive than that.
  These are my favorites, not those.

- A **reflexive pronoun** refers to a noun and provides emphasis or shows distinction from others. Reflexive pronouns are formed with the suffixes –self and –selves.

  For example:
  
  Bianca made the cake by herself.
  Erin and Renee tried to occupy themselves when work was slow.

**Pronoun and antecedent agreement**

The guidelines for Standard American Written English dictate that a pronoun must “agree” in person and number with its antecedent, the word that the pronoun replaces or the word to which it refers.

Incorrect: Students should be careful about checking the grammar in her writing.*
Correct: Students should be careful about checking the grammar in their writing.

A student should be careful about checking grammar in their writing.

As illustrated by the last example, the use of “their” to refer to a third-person, gender-neutral singular noun is becoming acceptable among readers and writers who are tired of using “he or she” repeatedly or who acknowledge that many people prefer to be referred to using gender-neutral pronouns. For this reason, the writing center supports the use of the singular “they” and “them.” We recommend, however, that writers be aware of their audiences when deciding to use the singular “they” or “them” in their writing. Professors or supervisors may correct such usage when they see it.

- Antecedents joined by the word and take plural pronouns.

  For example: Lisa and Tracy are writing their papers.

- Use a singular pronoun to refer to two or more singular antecedents joined by the words or or nor.

  For example: Ben or James will read his essay.

- When there is more than one type of antecedent – a singular and a plural – joined by the words or or nor, the pronoun agrees with the closest antecedent.

  For example: The teacher or the students will have their way.
  The students or the teacher will have her way.

**Vague pronoun reference**

In conversation, the words it and they are often used to make vague reference to people and situations. In writing, more precise identification is needed.

Vague: The history test was made up of multiple choice questions. This disturbed us.
Better: The history test was made up of multiple choice questions. This failure to evaluate students’ analytic abilities disturbed us.

* Last updated 9/8/2016