



Proper Pronoun Usage

Overview

A pronoun is a word that is used instead of a noun or a noun phrase.

Example: Susan plays tennis = She plays tennis

Rule for Proper Use: Gender

A pronoun must agree in gender (masculine, feminine) or neuter (it, its). A Pronoun must also agree in number (singular, plural).

Example: Nancy named her dog Simon. Nancy named him Simon.

In sentence 2, “her dog” has been replaced by the masculine pronoun “him”.

Example: The reader must make up his own mind. The reader must make up his or her own mind.

If gender is not clearly known, it is more inclusive to use the 2nd sentence.

Example: Readers must make up their own minds.

For those who find the use of “his or her” cumbersome, the best solution is to use the plural pronoun, and an accompanying plural noun.

Note: to indicate gender neutrality, the pronoun they & their can be used as a singular pronoun, e.g. the student handed in their essay.

Rule for Proper Use: Number

Example: Chloe is one of those students **who** skips their classes regularly.

Students is the antecedent of the relative pronoun **who**. Both the verb “skips” and the pronoun “their” are plural. Note that **one of those** takes the **plural**, but **one of these** is singular, as in “One of these gloves is lost.”

Example: The jury has reached its decision.

Here the jury acts as a unit and is considered **singular**. When the parts of a collective noun are considered, individually, the pronoun is plural:

Example: The jury have expressed their differences of opinion.

Here the jury acts individually; each member has his or her own opinion.

Example: Nobody wore his or her name badge at the conference.

To avoid stating gender:

- Nobody wore their name badges at the conference (**not** considered grammatically correct, gender neutral); or
- None of us wore our name badges.

Best approach is to use plural form:

- None of the conference attendees wore their name badges.

Rule for Proper Use: In case

Pronouns have different forms depending on their case. They may be **subjects** (he, she, they), **objects** (him, her, them), or **possessives** (his, her, their).

Example: The police officer stated that it was **she** who had reported the theft of the painting.

She is used here because a verb is implied.

Example: It was they who masterminded the robbery.

They and not **them** is used, because it functions as the **subject** of the verb had masterminded.

Example: The poodle gave his master fleas. The poodle gave **him them**.

In sentence 2, the objective forms for both pronouns, objects of the verb gave, have been substituted.

→ Check to see that your pronoun references are present and accounted for:

Unclear: In small towns, they do not lock their cars.

Clearer: Residents in small towns do not lock their cars.

→ Avoid broad pronoun references:

Unclear: Dexter stays up all night watching reruns of old TV shows, which is why he falls asleep on the job so often.

Clearer: Dexter stays up all night watching reruns of old TV shows, a habit which causes him to fall asleep on the job often.

Rule for Proper Use: Reflexive Pronouns

There are singular (myself, yourself, herself, himself, itself and oneself) and plural (ourselves, yourselves and themselves) reflexive pronouns.

A reflexive pronoun is used as the object of a verb or preposition when the subject of the sentence and the object are the same person, i.e. I and myself are the same person:

Incorrect: I saw me in the mirror.

Correct: I saw myself in the mirror.

Reflexive pronouns are also used for emphasis. Bellow, the speaker would say “I myself” strongly, with emphasis. The empathetic reflexive pronoun can immediately follow a noun or pronoun, or come at the end of a clause.

Example: I myself proofread the report. OR Yes, I proofread the report myself.

The expression **by** + a reflexive pronoun means “alone.”

Example: Anna lives by herself.

Practice Exercise

- 1) Find and correct problems with pronouns in the following sentences:
- 2) Sandy watched Joanne in horror as she was coming down the ramp.
- 3) In this book it says that tomatoes will not grow under black walnut trees.
- 4) When you are invited to a party, one is expected to respond quickly to the invitation.
- 5) Both Phil and me believe that work is overrated.
- 6) I didn't buy a subscription this year, which was an expensive mistake.
- 7) Everyone in the room was a possible suspect, so they were all asked to remain.
- 8) A copy editor should pay attention when they are on the job.
- 9) Tommy told a lie. He was ashamed of him.

Answers

- 1) No changes
- 2) This book says that tomatoes will not grow under black walnut trees.
- 3) When you are invited to a party, you are expected to respond quickly to the invitation.
- 4) Both Phil and I believe that work is overrated.
- 5) I didn't buy a subscription this year, an action/decision which was an expensive mistake.
- 6) Everyone in the room was a possible suspect, so all of the people were asked to remain.

- 7) A copy editor should pay attention when he or she is on the job. OR Copy editors should pay attention when they are on the job.
- 8) Tommy told a lie. He was ashamed of himself.

Source: Azar, B. (1999). Understanding and Using English Grammar (3rd ed.). Longman