



Faulty Pronoun Reference:

A pronoun depends on a noun (called the pronoun's antecedent) for meaning. Ensure clarity in your writing by making pronoun antecedents absolutely clear and obvious.

- a) Place pronouns as close to their antecedents as possible.
- b) Make pronoun reference exact.
- c) Whenever possible mention the noun first before you replace it with a pronoun.

D) Avoid sentences in which there are two possible antecedents for a pronoun.

Example: After Mrs. Roy had scolded little Sylvia, she regretted her rudeness. (To whom do *she* and *her* refer to?)

Edited: After Mrs. Roy had scolded her, little Sylvia regretted her rudeness.

Edited: After scolding little Sylvia, Mrs. Roy regretted her own rudeness.

Practice: Revise the following sentences by eliminating the ambiguous pronoun reference.

- 1) He broke the record on the phonograph arm and broke it.
 - 2) If Hitler had behaved differently with Stalin, he might have behaved differently.
 - 3) When President Nixon met with Chairman Mao, he felt a new chapter in history had begun.
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- 4) Sid gave his brother a copy of *The Bluest Eyes*, which was his favorite book.

- 5) The American people have elected a number of inadequate presidents, but congress has kept them from ruining the country.

- 6) Ashley told Crystal that she should never have married Brad Pitt.

- 7) D.J. had a dog with fleas which he was always scratching.

- 8) Katy told her friend that she should take speech lessons.

- 9) John Steinbeck should have written a biography of Martin Luther King after he had won the Nobel Prize.

- 10) When Bonnie visited her mother she was very angry.

II) Avoid references to an antecedent which is remote from the pronoun or so placed as to confuse the reader.

The birds sang in the forest where the undergrowth was thick, and a brook wound slowly in the valley. They were of many colors. (*They* refers to birds but the pronoun is too far removed)

The birds... The leaves of the undergrowth ...

- 1) The school belongs to the community. Students and their parents should work closely with faculty and administrators in developing programs of instruction and recreation. It could be a meeting place for all community activities.
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2) The delegates arrived in twos and threes for the emergency session at the UN. Interested spectators were also streaming in. They stopped only to pose for the press photographers at the entrance.

3) The crowd watched as the computer projected the election returns all across the nation. *It* moaned. *It* groaned. *It* was an unexpected defeat.

4) He agreed that marijuana is simply a means of achieving relaxation and that artists, writers, and even office workers find it necessary.

5) He and his opponent made promises to the people of the nation to augment and revitalize the various poverty programs. But they were soon forgotten after the election.

III) Avoid the vague use of “this,” “that,” or “which” to refer to the general idea of a preceding clause or sentence. In general, a pronoun should refer to a particular word in the preceding sentence. Eliminate a vague pronoun reference by the following methods:

a) Recast the sentence to eliminate the pronoun.

b) Supply a specific antecedent for the pronoun.

Example:

Vague: The profits from the investment would be large, which I realized almost immediately.

Clearer: I realized almost immediately that the profits from the investment would be large.
(pronoun is eliminated)

Clearer: The profits from the investment would be large, a fact that I realized almost immediately.

Practice in correcting vague pronouns.

- 1) The literary program was poorly supported, which frustrated many students.
 - 2) Dr. King was dedicated to nonviolence, which influenced him to become a minister.
 - 3) People should always vote on Election Day. This is an indication of their desire to have a good government.
 - 4) Marlon Brando mumbles his lines and scratches his nose, which he learned in acting school.
 - 5) The government gives farmers not to grow crops. This is not helping to solve the problem of hunger among poor people.
 - 6) The migrant farm worker is not protected by minimum wage laws, and this should be corrected immediately.
 - 7) The campus paper proposed that administration provide birth control mechanisms, which upset official very much.
 - 8) The Israelis and the Palestinians are constantly poised on the edge of war. This adds much to international tension.
 - 9) There is a part on the far side of the museum which is not open to the public
 - 10) She was self-conscious about her money. But this did not bother her real friends.
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IV) Important: Do not use a pronoun to refer to a noun that is not expressed but is merely implied by the preceding construction.

Example:

Because we put the wire fence around the chicken yard, they cannot escape. (The sentence implies the antecedent chickens, but the word is not expressed; replace they with “the chickens.”)

Vague: Tom’s brother is an engineer, and this is the profession Tom wants to study. (this cannot logically refer to engineer)

Clearer: Tom’s brother is an engineer and engineering is the profession Tom wants to pursue.

Practice in correcting reference to unexpressed antecedents.

- 1) She is a meticulous housekeeper because she learned it as a child.

 - 2) Because Lucy had never worked a potter’s wheel, she supposed it was easy.

 - 3) There is a police station near the church, and we called them when we saw broken windows in the basement.

 - 4) The orange trees were covered with cloths and fanned by the warmth of heaters. This was because of the frost that had settled over Florida.

 - 5) After hearing a lecture on underwater experimentation, Mr. X had great admiration for them.
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V) Avoid the indefinite use of *they, you* and *it*.

In less industrial areas, they do not understand the problems of the city.

In some states you are not allowed to drive faster than fifty miles an hour.

It says in the newspaper that Monday will be warmer.

Practice in correcting the indefinite use of *you they* and *it*.

- 1) In every society you have to expect that some people will not be able to provide for themselves.
 - 2) In South America you hear of revolutions every few months.
 - 3) In the Vietnam agreement it is said that all American POWs would be released.
 - 4) Throughout the development of the West, they drove back the Indians and took their land.
 - 5) In the Victorian era they never talked about sex in the public.
 - 6) When I called the CIA, they said they didn't have any openings for summer jobs.
 - 7) The government pays large sums of money everywhere, except where you need it.
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8) In every generation, you find a “generation gap.”

Summary of Rules:

I) Avoid sentences in which there are two possible antecedents for a pronoun.

II) Avoid references to an antecedent which is remote from the pronoun or so placed as to confuse the reader.

III) Avoid the vague use of *this that* and *which*.

IV) Do not use a pronoun to refer to a noun that is *not expressed* but is *merely implied* by the preceding sentence.

V) Avoid the indefinite use of *they you* and *it*.
