

FINDING AND FIXING PRONOUN AGREEMENT ERRORS

Understand the problem.

Whenever you use a **personal pronoun** like *she*, *it*, or *they*, you first must establish its **antecedent**, the word that the pronoun is replacing.

Read this sentence:

Gustavo slowed to the speed limit when **he** saw the police cruiser in the rearview mirror.

The pronoun *he* replaces the antecedent *Gustavo*. Pronouns like *he* will keep you from repeating *Gustavo, Gustavo, Gustavo* over and over again.

In addition, a pronoun must *agree* with its antecedent. To navigate this agreement successfully, you will need to know these singular and plural pronoun forms:

SINGULAR	PLURAL
he, she, it	they
him, her, it	them
his, her, hers, its	their, theirs
himself, herself, itself	themselves

The general rule for pronoun agreement is straightforward: A singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun; a plural antecedent needs a plural pronoun.

Read these examples:

The **boy** scratched **his** armpit.

The **boys** scratched **their** armpits.

In most cases, you will not need to debate whether you need the singular or plural form. The spoken English that you have heard repeatedly will help you make the right pronoun choice when you write.

Use the correct pronoun in tricky situations.

Unfortunately, English also includes some *special* agreement situations. These will require your more careful attention.

EACH AND EVERY COMPLICATE PRONOUN AGREEMENT.

In math, $1 + 1 = 2$. This rule applies to pronoun agreement as well. If you have 1 singular **noun** + 1 singular noun, then together they equal 2 things, making a plural **antecedent**.

Read these examples:

The woodpecker **and** its mate tried **their** best to oust the squirrel who had stolen **their** nest.

Ronald wanted the attention of the cheerleader **and** the baton twirler, but he could not make **them** look his way.

The plural **pronouns** *their* and *them* are logical choices for *woodpecker + mate* and *cheerleader + baton twirler*, respectively.

Two words, however, have incredible sentence power. **Each** and **every** are singular and can strong-arm an otherwise plural antecedent to become singular.

Observe what happens:

The butterfly **and** bee drank **their** fill of nectar in the backyard garden.

Each butterfly **and** bee drank **its** fill of nectar in the backyard garden.

Every butterfly, bee, wasp, **and** hummingbird drank **its** fill of nectar in the backyard garden.

CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS CONFUSE PRONOUN AGREEMENT.

Exercise caution when you use **correlative conjunctions** like *either ... or*, *neither ... nor*, and *not only ... but also*. Because correlative conjunctions present pairs, you will find two separate **antecedents**.

Read these examples:

Not only the handpicked **flowers** **but also** the homemade peanut butter **pie** will win Briana's heart with **its** thoughtfulness.

Not only the homemade peanut butter **pie** **but also** the handpicked **flowers** will win Briana's heart with **their** thoughtfulness.

Notice that you have two antecedents, the *homemade peanut butter pie* (singular) and the *handpicked flowers* (plural). Use the *closer* of the two antecedents to determine if you need a singular or plural pronoun.

SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS CAUSE PROBLEMS.

Indefinite pronouns, a special class of words, will often be **antecedents** for **personal pronouns**. Some indefinite pronouns—despite the illogic—are singular and will often require a singular pronoun for agreement.

SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS
each, either, neither, one
anybody, anyone, anything
everybody, everyone, everything
nobody, no one, nothing
somebody, someone, something

Consider these examples:

Anticipating a prank, **neither** of my brothers would take a glass of my homemade lemonade to quench ~~their~~ **his** thirst.

Aunt Ida will cook **anything** that you pick from the garden. Just wash ~~them~~ **it** so that you do not dirty her pristine counter!

Nothing is in ~~their~~ **its** place after the violent shaking from the earthquake.

Indefinite pronouns that refer to people—those that end in **body** or **one**, for example—are trickier. When you read, you will notice that writers have different strategies for handling these words.

In older publications, you will find writers exclusively using a masculine personal pronoun (**he**, **him**, **his**, or **himself**) to establish agreement with a singular indefinite pronoun (such as **everyone**):

When the lifeguard shouted, "Shark!" **everyone** returned to **his** spot on the sand.

Excluding half the human race was deemed unfair, so in the late twentieth century, writers tried to give masculine and feminine singular pronouns equal use, like this:

When the lifeguard shouted, "Shark!" **everyone** returned to **his or her** spot on the sand.

Constructions like **he or she** and **him or her** created reading experiences that were truly clunky. Plus, some individuals wanted other people to refer to them with plural pronouns like **they**. As a result, you can now find writers producing sentences like this:

When the lifeguard shouted, "Shark!" **everyone** returned to **their** spot on the sand.

Other contemporary writers believe that agreement still matters, so their solution is to avoid singular indefinite pronouns altogether, choosing plural **nouns** instead:

When the lifeguard shouted, "Shark!" the **swimmers** returned to **their** spots on the sand.

NOT ALL INDEFINITE PRONOUNS ARE STRICTLY SINGULAR.

Another group of **indefinite pronouns** is singular or plural, depending on the information from the **prepositional phrase** that follows.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS THAT ARE SINGULAR OR PLURAL
all, any, none*, more, most, some

Read these examples:

Some of this footwear smells because Tina wears **it** to the barn.

Some of these shoes smell because Tina wears **them** to the barn.

In the first sentence, **footwear** makes **some** singular, so **it** is the pronoun that agrees. In the second sentence, **shoes**, a plural **noun**, has all the power. **Some** becomes plural too, and **them** is the appropriate pronoun for agreement.

*Some people consider **none** a strictly singular word, a contraction of **no one**. We at *Grammar Bytes!* subscribe to the alternative belief that **none** is the opposite of **all**, and, like **all**, can be either singular or plural. Exercises here will reflect that belief.

LEARN TO MAINTAIN PRONOUN AGREEMENT WITH COLLECTIVE NOUNS.

Collective nouns name groups (which are *things*) composed of members (who are usually *people*).

COLLECTIVE NOUNS
army, audience, board, cabinet, class
committee, company, corporation, council
department, faculty, family, firm, group
jury, majority, minority, navy
public, school, senate, team, troop, troupe

When the members of the group act *in unison*—everyone doing essentially the same thing at the same time—then the collective noun is singular and requires singular pronouns for agreement.

Read these examples:

The **family** is at the table, ready for **its** dinner, whenever Grandma prepares her delicious chicken pot pie.

The **committee** decided to spend **its** budget surplus on yo-yos for the officers.

The **team** agreed to host a car wash to finance **its** farthest away game.

When, however, the members of the group act *as individuals*—each person taking on separate responsibilities or actions—then the collective noun is plural and requires plural pronouns for agreement.

Consider these changes:

When Grandpa begins boiling liver, the **family** quickly find other plans for **their** meals.

At the car wash, the **team** took **their** places so that each vehicle got vacuumed, washed, and dried.

The **committee** disagree if **they** should offer Billie financial assistance after he suffered a concussion during an unfortunate yo-yo accident.

If deciding whether the collective noun is singular or plural makes your head hurt, remember that you have a couple of options.

First, you can substitute a regular plural **noun** for the collective noun. Then you can use—without debate—a plural pronoun.

The ~~team~~ **football players** earned 500 dollars for **their** trip.

Another option is to add the word **members** after a collective noun. **Members** is a plural **antecedent** and requires a **they, them, their**, etc.

When Grandpa has dinner duty, the **family members** stretch **their** budgets by eating dollar items from the value menu at Tito's Taco Palace.

The **committee members** wish that **they** had spent **their** surplus on soft teddy bears, not skull-crushing yo-yos.

UNLIKE COLLECTIVE NOUNS, NAMED BUSINESSES, SCHOOLS, AND ORGANIZATIONS ARE ALWAYS SINGULAR.

Many people comprise a business, school, or organization. For the purposes of pronoun agreement, however, consider these three groups singular and use *it*, *its*, or *itself* to maintain agreement.

Read these examples:

To increase **its** profits, **Tito's Taco Palace** packs **its** burritos with cheap refried beans.

Weaver High School encourages **its** students to make leaner lunch choices, such as hot, steaming bowls of squid eyeball stew.

The Southeastern Association of Salt & Pepper Shaker Enthusiasts will hold **its** annual convention in Atlanta, Georgia.

