

# FINDING AND FIXING PRONOUN REFERENCE ERRORS

## Understand the problem.

---

**Pronouns** are chameleon words. In one sentence, for example, the pronoun *he* might mean *Zippy the dog*; in another sentence *he* might replace *the rock star on stage, the President of the United States, or my lab partner Fred, who picks his nose*. Just as a chameleon changes its color to coordinate with its environment, a pronoun alters its meaning to match the nearby **antecedent**, the word that the pronoun replaces.

Problems occur when the antecedent is unclear or missing. If you say, “You should hear *her* purr,” you might mean your cat Lucy, or you might mean the engine of your souped-up sports car. *Her* could refer to either the living pet or the inanimate vehicle. In a conversation, we can ask, “You mean the cat, right?” but in a piece of writing that speaks in your stead, your readers remain confused.

When you fail to confirm that a pronoun has a single, clear antecedent, you lose control of the picture that you want your words to create in your readers’ minds.

If you are not careful, several common situations will create unclear pronoun reference.

## Exercise caution when you have two singular antecedents with the same gender.

---

Pronoun confusion is common when a sentence contains two or more **antecedents** with the same gender.

Read this example:

Edwin told Kenny that Professor Wilson suspected that **he** had cheated on the chemistry exam.

Which male is in trouble? Is Edwin a gossip who enjoys torturing Kenny with the thought of Professor Wilson’s impending punishment? Or is Edwin confessing that *he* is the one Professor Wilson suspects? Because *he* does not have a single, clear

antecedent—*it* can refer to either **Kenny** or **Edwin**—this sentence has pronoun reference problems.

To fix a pronoun reference error, you will often have to revise the sentence, replacing the pronoun with a clear, specific **noun**.

Observe what happens:

Edwin told Kenny that Professor Wilson suspected that **Kenny** cheated on the chemistry exam.

Edwin told Kenny that Professor Wilson suspected that **Edwin** cheated on the chemistry exam.

If you dislike the repetition of the names **Kenny** or **Edwin**, set up dialogue like this:

Edwin told Kenny, “Professor Wilson suspects that **you** cheated on the chemistry exam.”

Edwin told Kenny, “Professor Wilson suspects that **I** cheated on the chemistry exam.”

**Kenny** and **Edwin** are examples of two gender-specific antecedents in the same sentence. The same kind of pronoun reference problem can occur with the gender-neutral **it**.

Read this example:

John had just set down the overstuffed sandwich when he spotted a cockroach on the table. He smashed **it** with his open palm before he ate.

Some readers might assume that John smashed the insect. But I might think that he smashed the sandwich so that it would fit in his mouth. Our confusion means that **it** is an unclear pronoun. Substituting a specific **noun** will let us know John’s attitude toward a cockroach on the table:

John had just set down the overstuffed sandwich when he spotted a cockroach on the table. He smashed **the insect** with his open palm before he ate.

John had just set down the overstuffed sandwich when he spotted a cockroach on the table. He smashed **the bread** with his open palm before he ate.

No problem pronoun = no reference error!

## A possessive noun should not be the antecedent for a pronoun.

---

Possessive nouns function as **adjectives**. You can drive a *fast* car, a *red* car, a *dirty* car, or *Mom's* car. *Fast*, *red*, and *dirty* are all adjectives telling us which car. The possessive noun *Mom's* is adjectival too.

You ruin the clarity of a sentence when a possessive noun is the **antecedent** for a subject or object pronoun like *he* or *him*.

Read this example:

*Kevin's* fingers were strumming the guitar when *he* winked at Donna.

When we read this sentence, we assume that Kevin is the *he* winking at Donna. But remember that *Kevin's* is acting as an adjective, not a **noun**. If we replaced *Kevin's* with *agile*, *quick*, or *long*, we wouldn't consider any of those adjectives the antecedent for *he*, so we shouldn't consider *Kevin's* either. And the fingers certainly aren't doing the winking as they have no eyes!

Furthermore, a reader might wonder if the *whole* Kevin is strumming the guitar or if his disembodied fingers alone are making the music. The sentence in its current version is unclear.

To fix the problem, you can replace the pronoun with a specific noun. You can't have a pronoun reference error if you have no pronoun!

Kevin's fingers were strumming the guitar when **this young man** winked at Donna.

Or you can revise the sentence so that the pronoun refers to a real noun—that is, a real antecedent:

As **Kevin** strummed the guitar, **he** winked at Donna.

## Use the pronoun *they* with precision.

---

During a conversation, you can clarify a pronoun's **antecedent** by pointing to someone or something. You might choose to introduce a visual aid. Or you might

know your audience's background and experience well enough to assume that these people know *who* or *what* you mean.

But when you write, the audience is often beyond your control, so the words alone must capture the picture that you have in your head and transfer it accurately to the heads of your readers.

When we speak, we can get away with a sentence like this one:

If you want one last greasy burrito, you better visit Tito's Taco Palace today. **They** say that the restaurant closes for good tomorrow.

Notice that **they** has no antecedent. No plural noun exists to give **they** its meaning. In a conversation, you can assume that your audience knows that **they** means, perhaps, mutual friends who work at Tito's Taco Palace. But when you write, your audience can be anyone. And maybe that audience thinks **they** refers to ***space aliens, the kitchen appliances, or talking squirrels***—all possible antecedents for **they**.

For this reason, substitute a specific **noun** for an unclear **they**. This way, your audience understands what you meant when you composed the sentence.

If you want one last greasy burrito, you better visit Tito's Taco Palace today. **Our local newspaper** says that the restaurant closes for good tomorrow.

## Use the pronoun **it** with precision.

---

Because speaking gives us very little time to edit before the audience gets the information, we often use an **it** that has no clear **antecedent**. We say things like the examples below:

It said on the news today that a sinkhole swallowed a car on Primrose Avenue.

In our math textbook, **it** claims that statistical analysis will be one of the most important skills in the future.

*What* said? *What* claims? Neither **it** has a clear antecedent.

When you write, you *do* have time to edit and can easily fix this kind of problem. Read these revisions:

On the news today, a **reporter** said that a sinkhole swallowed a car on Primrose Avenue.

**Our math textbook** claims that statistical analysis will be one of the most important skills in the future.

You can't have a pronoun reference problem if you have eliminated the pronoun!

Remember also that **it** can refer to any *single* thing. Read this sentence:

Lightning struck the roof, frying the circuit breaker and shorting out the television and computer. Mom cannot afford **it** this month.

**Roof, circuit breaker, television, and computer** are all possible antecedents for **it**. Not having a roof and not having a computer cause two very different sets of problems. For clarity, use a specific **noun** instead of **it**:

Lightning struck the roof, frying the circuit breaker and shorting out the television and computer. Mom cannot afford **one more repair** this month.

## **Confirm that the pronouns *this, that, and which* have single, clear antecedents.**

---

Sometimes we sum up a complicated situation with a pronouncement like "That was really cool!" or "This blew our minds!" Or we might add as a tag to the end of a sentence, "Which amazed us all." Remember, though, that **that, this, and which** all require one clear **antecedent**. If too many things happened, your reader will get confused.

Read this example:

After sending a break-up text message to his girlfriend Skyler, Jesse forgot to wash his hands before he mixed old mayonnaise into the potato salad with a dirty spoon. **That** was disgusting!

What one thing was disgusting? **That** can refer to the text message to Skyler, the dirty hands, or the poor choice of ingredients and tools. A reader cannot be sure what exactly you have pronounced disgusting.

To fix the problem, replace the **that** with a clear, specific **noun**.

Jesse's relationship skills are disgusting!

Jesse's hygiene is disgusting!

Jesse's kitchen operation is disgusting!

## Use second-person pronouns only for direct address.

---

*You, your, yours, yourself* and *yourselves* are the second-person pronouns. If you are directly addressing your readers, these pronouns are appropriate. For example, you can ask a question like "Have **you** ever ...?" or "Do **you** remember when ...?" to connect with your readers and draw them into your argument.

Second-person pronouns can also slip into our writing when they are *not* appropriate. Sometimes we want to distance ourselves from the material. Sometimes we so want to convince our readers of a point that we bring them in to the work when they don't belong.

Read these examples:

I never ride roller coasters because they make **you** throw up.

In ancient Egypt, only the very rich were entombed; without sufficient wealth, **you** just got buried in the sand.

I never ride roller coasters because *you* throw up? If you were the one who vomited, *I* would ride roller coasters every chance I had! In ancient Egypt, *you* were buried in the sand? You don't appear old enough to have lived in ancient Egypt!

Replace the second-person pronouns to fix the problems:

I never ride roller coasters because they make **me** throw up.

In ancient Egypt, only the very rich were entombed; without sufficient wealth, **the deceased** just got buried in the sand.

## Who, which, and that are not interchangeable.

---

The **relative pronouns** *who*, *which*, and *that* should each refer to specific types of **nouns**.

## **USING WHO**

Use **who** when you refer to people, famous animals, or named pets. Read these examples:

Lenore, **who** refused a dish of ice cream, had to sit through fifteen minutes of yums and ooohs as we consumed ours.

My little brother most resembles the Looney Tunes character Taz, **who** cannot sit still for more than a few seconds.

Our bulldog Ricky, **who** has his own social media accounts, enjoys surfing and skateboarding.

## **USING WHICH**

Use **which** for inanimate objects and unnamed animals.

We dug into the tasty potato salad, **which** Jesse had begrudgingly prepared for the picnic.

Lenore's dish of ice cream, **which** melted in the hot sun, attracted the attention of flies.

Our parrot, **which** my roommate rescued from the apartment roof, can say hello in three languages.

## **USING THAT**

Use **that** to refer to anything unnamed (though **who** is traditional and preferred for people).

An alligator bit a boy **that** was fishing at the lake.

The alligator **that** the hunters caught was twelve feet long.

The boat **that** brought the alligator to shore almost capsized from the weight of the beast.

