**Pronoun Agreement**

**Recognize pronoun agreement when you find it.**

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Singular</strong></th>
<th><strong>Plural</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him, her, it</td>
<td>them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his, her, hers, its</td>
<td>their, theirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>himself, herself, itself</td>
<td>themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>each, either, neither, one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anybody, anyone, anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everybody, everyone, everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobody, no one, nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somebody, someone, something</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 **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.

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**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.