

CHAPTER 19

Pronoun Reference

A **pronoun** such as *it* or *they* derives its meaning from its **antecedent**, the noun it substitutes for. Therefore, a pronoun must refer clearly and unmistakably to its antecedent in order for the meaning to be clear. A sentence such as *Jim told Mark he was not invited* is not clear because the reader does not know whether *he* refers to Jim or to Mark.

One way to make pronoun reference clear is to ensure that the pronoun and antecedent agree in person, number, and gender (see p. 313). The other way is to ensure that the pronoun refers unambiguously to a single, close, specific antecedent.

Note Grammar and style checkers cannot recognize unclear pronoun reference. For instance, a checker did not spot any of the problems in Exercise 19.2 on page 356.

An English pronoun does need a clear antecedent nearby, but don't use both a pronoun and its antecedent as the subject of the same sentence or clause: *Jim [not Jim he] told Mark to go alone.* (See also pp. 375–76.)

Make a pronoun refer clearly to one antecedent.

When either of two nouns can be a pronoun's antecedent, the reference will not be clear:

Confusing Emily Dickinson is sometimes compared with Jane Austen, but she was quite different.

Revise such a sentence in one of two ways:

▼ **Replace the pronoun with the appropriate noun:**

Clear Emily Dickinson is sometimes compared with Jane Austen, but Dickinson [or Austen] was quite different.

▼ **Avoid repetition by rewriting the sentence.** If you use the pronoun, make sure it has only one possible antecedent:

Clear Despite occasional comparison, Emily Dickinson and Jane Austen were quite different.

Clear Though sometimes compared with her, Emily Dickinson was quite different from Jane Austen.

Sentences that report what someone said, using verbs such as *said* or *told*, often require direct rather than indirect quotation:

Confusing Juliet Noble told Ann Torre that she was next in line for the job.

Clear Juliet Noble told Ann Torre, "I am next in line for the job."

Clear Juliet Noble told Ann Torre, "You are next in line for the job."

Note Avoid the awkward device of using a pronoun followed by the appropriate noun in parentheses, as in the following example:

Weak Noble and Torre had both hoped for the job, so she (Noble) was disappointed.

Improved Noble was disappointed because she and Torre had both hoped for the job.

Place a pronoun close enough to its antecedent to ensure clarity.

A clause beginning *who*, *which*, or *that* generally should fall immediately after the word to which it refers:

Confusing Jody found a lamp in the attic that her aunt had used.

Clear In the attic Jody found a lamp that her aunt had used.

Even when only one word could possibly serve as the antecedent of a pronoun, the relationship between the two may still be unclear if they are widely separated:

Confusing Jane Austen had little formal education but was well educated at home. Far from living an isolated life in the English countryside, the Austens were a large family with a wide circle of friends who provided entertainment and cultural enrichment. They also provided material for her stories.

Clear Jane Austen had little formal education but was well educated at home. Far from living an isolated life in the English countryside, the Austens were a large family with a wide circle of friends who provided entertainment and cultural enrichment. They also provided material for Jane Austen's stories.

EXERCISE 19.1 Revising: Ambiguous and remote pronoun reference

Rewrite the following sentences to eliminate unclear pronoun reference. If you use a pronoun in your revision, be sure that it refers to only one antecedent and that it falls close enough to its antecedent to ensure clarity. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

Saul found an old gun in the rotting shed that was just as his grandfather had left it.

In the rotting shed Saul found an old gun that was just as his grandfather had left it.

1. There is a difference between the heroes of the twentieth century and the heroes of earlier times: they have flaws in their characters.
2. Sports fans still admire Pete Rose, Babe Ruth, and Joe Namath even though they could not be perfect.
3. Fans liked Rose for having his young son serve as batboy when he was in Cincinnati.
4. The reputation Rose earned as a gambler and tax evader may over-shadow his reputation as a ballplayer, but it will survive.
5. Rose amassed an unequalled record as a hitter, using his bat to do things no one else has ever done. It stands even though Rose was banned from baseball.

Make a pronoun refer to a specific antecedent, not an implied one.

A pronoun should refer to a specific noun or other pronoun. The reader can only guess at the meaning of a pronoun when its antecedent is implied by the context, not stated outright.

Use *this*, *that*, *which*, and *it* cautiously.

The most common kind of implied reference occurs when the pronoun *this*, *that*, *which*, or *it* refers to a whole idea or situation described in the preceding clause, sentence, or even paragraph. Such reference, often called **broad reference**, is acceptable only when the pronoun refers clearly to the entire preceding clause. In the following sentence, *which* could not possibly refer to anything but the whole preceding clause:

I can be kind and civil to people, which is more than you can.

—George Bernard Shaw

But if a pronoun might confuse a reader, you should avoid using it or provide an appropriate noun:

Confusing The British knew little of the American countryside, and they had no experience with the colonists' guerilla tactics. This gave the colonists an advantage.

Clear The British knew little of the American countryside, and they had no experience with the colonists' guerrilla tactics. This ignorance and inexperience gave the colonists an advantage.

Implied nouns are not clear antecedents.

A noun may be implied in some other word or phrase, as *happiness* is implied in *happy*, *driver* is implied in *drive*, and *mother* is implied in *mother's*. But a pronoun cannot refer clearly to an implied noun, only to a specific, stated one:

Confusing Cohen's report brought her a lawsuit.

Clear Cohen was sued over her report.

Confusing Her reports on psychological development generally go unnoticed outside it.

Clear Her reports on psychological development generally go unnoticed outside the field.

Titles of papers are not clear antecedents.

The title of a paper is entirely separate from the paper itself, so a pronoun should not be used in the opening sentence of a paper to refer to the title:

Title How to Row a Boat

Not This is not as easy as it looks.

But Rowing a boat is not as easy as it looks.

Use *it* and *they* to refer only to definite antecedents.

Although common in speech, using *it* and *they* to refer to indefinite antecedents is inappropriate in writing.

Confusing In Chapter 4 of this book, it describes the early flights of the Wright brothers.

Clear Chapter 4 of this book describes the early flights of the Wright brothers.

Confusing Even in reality TV shows, they present a false picture of life.

Clear Even reality TV shows present a false picture of life.

Use *you* only to mean "you, the reader."

You should clearly mean "you, the reader." The context must be appropriate for such a meaning:

Inappropriate In the fourteenth century you had to struggle simply to survive.

Revised In the fourteenth century one [or a person] had to struggle simply to survive.

Writers sometimes drift into *you* because *one*, *a person*, *the individual*, or a similar indefinite word can be difficult to sustain. Sentence after sentence, the indefinite word may sound stuffy, and it

requires the sexist *he* or the awkward *he or she* for pronoun-antecedent agreement (see pp. 315–16). To avoid these difficulties, try using plural nouns and pronouns:

Original	In the fourteenth century one had to struggle simply to survive.
Revised	In the fourteenth century people had to struggle simply to survive.

Use the pronoun *it* only one way in a sentence.

We use *it* idiomatically in expressions such as *It is raining*. We use *it* to postpone the subject in sentences such as *It is true that more jobs are available to women today*. And we use *it* as a personal pronoun in sentences such as *Nicole wanted the book, but she couldn't find it*. All these uses are standard, but two of them in the same passage can confuse the reader:

Confusing	It is true that the Constitution sets limits, but it is also flexible.
Clear	The Constitution does set limits, but it is also flexible.

Use *who*, *which*, and *that* for appropriate antecedents.

The relative pronouns *who*, *which*, and *that* commonly refer to persons, animals, or things. *Who* refers most often to persons but may also refer to animals that have names:

Dorothy is the girl who visits Oz.
Her dog, Toto, who accompanies her, gives her courage.

Which refers to animals and things:

The Orinoco River, which is 1600 miles long, flows through Venezuela into the Atlantic Ocean.

That refers to animals and things and occasionally to persons when they are collective or anonymous:

The rocket that failed cost millions.

Infants that walk need constant tending.

(See also p. 437 for the use of *which* and *that* in nonessential and essential clauses.)

The possessive *whose* generally refers to people but may refer to animals and things to avoid awkward and wordy *of which* constructions:

The book whose binding broke was rare. [Compare *The book of which the binding broke was rare*.]

EXERCISE 19.2 Revising: Indefinite and inappropriate pronoun reference

Many of the pronouns in the following sentences do not refer to specific, appropriate antecedents. Revise the sentences as necessary to make them clear. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

In Glacier National Park, they have moose, elk, and wolves.
Moose, elk, and wolves live in Glacier National Park.

1. “Life begins at forty” is a cliché many people live by, and this may well be true.
2. When she was forty, Pearl Buck’s novel *The Good Earth* won the Pulitzer Prize.
3. Buck was a novelist which wrote primarily about China.
4. In *The Good Earth* you have to struggle, but fortitude is rewarded.
5. Buck received much critical praise and earned over \$7 million, but she was very modest about it.
6. Kenneth Kaunda, past president of Zambia, was elected to it in 1964, at age forty.
7. When Catherine I became empress of Russia at age forty, they feared more than loved her.
8. At forty, Paul Revere made his famous ride to warn American revolutionary leaders that the British were going to arrest them. This gave the colonists time to prepare for battle.

9. In the British House of Commons they did not welcome forty-year-old Nancy Astor as the first female member when she entered in 1919.
10. In 610 CE, Muhammad, age forty, began to have a series of vi-sions that became the foundation of the Muslim faith. Since then, millions of people have become one.

EXERCISE 19.3 Revising: Pronoun reference

Revise the following paragraph so that each pronoun refers clearly to a single specific and appropriate antecedent. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, she is a shy young woman that takes a job as governess. Her employer is a rude, brooding man named Rochester. He lives in a mysterious mansion on the English moors, which contributes an eerie quality to Jane's experience. Eerier still are the fires, strange noises, and other unexplained happenings in the house; but Rochester refuses to discuss this. Eventually, they fall in love. On the day they are to be married, however, she learns that he has a wife hidden in the house. She is hopelessly insane and violent and must be guarded at all times, which explains his strange behavior. Heartbroken, Jane leaves the moors, and many years pass before they are reunited.

Note See page 381 for an exercise involving unclear pronoun reference along with sentence fragments, comma splices, and other sentence errors.

CHAPTER 20

Shifts

Inconsistencies in grammatical elements will confuse your read-ers and distort your meaning. In the following passage from a first draft, the underlining indicates confusing inconsistencies in verbs, nouns, and pronouns:

First draft

A bank commonly owes more to its customers than is held in reserve. They kept enough assets to meet reasonable withdrawals, but panicked customers may demand all their deposits. Then demands will exceed supplies, and banks failed. These days, a person's losses are not likely to be great because the government insures your deposits.

Revised

A bank commonly owes more to its customers than it holds in reserve. It keeps enough assets to meet reasonable withdrawals, but panicked customers may demand all their deposits. Then demands will exceed supplies, and the bank will fail. These days, the losses of customers are not likely to be great because the government insures their deposits.

Shifts like those in the first draft are likely to occur while you are trying to piece together meaning during drafting. But during editing you should make your sentences consistent in grammatical elements.

Note Grammar and style checkers cannot recognize most shifts in sentences. Proofread your work on your own, looking carefully for inconsistencies.

Keep a sentence or related sentences consistent

in person and number.

Person in grammar refers to the distinction among the person talking (first person), the person spoken to (second person), and the person, object, or concept being talked about (third person). **Num-ber** refers to the distinction between one (singular) and more than one (plural).

v Shifts in person

Most shifts in person occur because we can refer to people in general, including our readers, either in the third person (*a person, one; people, they*) or in the second person (*you*):

People should not drive when they have been drinking.
 One should not drive when he or she has been drinking.
 You should not drive when you have been drinking.

Although any one of these possibilities is acceptable in an appropriate context, a mixture of them is inconsistent:

Inconsistent	If a person works hard, you can gain satisfaction.
Revised	If you work hard, you can gain satisfaction.
Revised	If a person works hard, he or she can gain satisfaction.
Better	If people work hard, they can gain satisfaction.

v Shifts in number

Inconsistency in number occurs most often between a pronoun and its antecedent (see p. 313):

Inconsistent	If a student does not understand a problem, they should consult the instructor.
Revised	If a student does not understand a problem, he or she should consult the instructor.
Better	If students do not understand a problem, they should consult the instructor.
Or	A student who does not understand a problem should consult the instructor.

Note Generic nouns and most indefinite pronouns take singular pronouns with a definite gender: *he, she, or it*. When we use a generic noun like *student* or *person* or an indefinite pronoun like *everyone* or *each*, we often mean to include both males and females. To indicate this meaning, use *he or she* rather than *he* (as in the first of the preceding revisions) or, better still, rewrite in the plural or rewrite to avoid the pronoun (as in the second and third of the revisions). See page 316 for more discussion and examples.

Inconsistency in number can also occur between other words (usually nouns) that relate to each other in meaning.

Inconsistent	All the boys have a good reputation.
Revised	All the boys have good reputations.

The consistency in the revised sentence is called **logical agreement** because the nouns are consistent (the *boys* have *reputations*, not a single *reputation*).

EXERCISE 20.1 Revising: Shifts in person and number

Revise the following sentences to make them consistent in person and number. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

A plumber will fix burst pipes, but they won't repair waterlogged appliances.
 Plumbers will fix burst pipes, but they won't repair waterlogged appliances.

1. When a taxpayer is waiting to receive a tax refund from the Internal Revenue Service, you begin to notice what time the mail carrier arrives.
2. If the taxpayer does not receive a refund check within six weeks of filing a return, they may not have followed the rules of the IRS.
3. If a taxpayer does not include a Social Security number on a re-turn, you will have to wait for a refund.
4. When taxpayers do not file their return early, they will not get a refund quickly.

5. If one makes errors on the tax form, they might even be audited, thereby delaying a refund even longer.

Keep a sentence or related sentences consistent in tense and mood.

v **Shifts in tense**

Within a sentence or from one sentence to another, certain changes in tense may be required to indicate changes in actual or relative time (see p. 296). The following changes are necessary:

Ramon will graduate from college thirty-one years after his father arrived in the United States.

But changes that are not required by meaning distract readers. Unnecessary shifts between past and present in passages narrating a series of events are particularly confusing:

Inconsistent Immediately after Booth shot Lincoln, Major Rathbone threw himself upon the assassin. But Booth pulls a knife and plunges it into the major's arm.

Revised Immediately after Booth shot Lincoln, Major Rathbone threw himself upon the assassin. But Booth pulled a knife and plunged it into the major's arm.

Use the present tense consistently to describe what an author has written, including the action in literature or a film:

Inconsistent The main character in the novel suffers psychologically because he has a clubfoot, but he eventually triumphed over his disability.

Revised The main character in the novel suffers psychologically because he has a clubfoot, but he eventually triumphs over his disability.

v **Shifts in mood**

Shifts in the mood of verbs occur most frequently in directions when the writer moves between the imperative mood (*Unplug the appliance*) and the indicative mood (*You should unplug the appliance*). (See p. 299.) Directions are usually clearer and more concise in the imperative, as long as its use is consistent:

Inconsistent Cook the mixture slowly, and you should stir it until the sugar is dissolved.

Revised Cook the mixture slowly, and stir it until the sugar is dissolved.

EXERCISE 20.2 REVISING: SHIFTS IN TENSE AND MOOD

Revise the following sentences to make them consistent in tense and mood. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

Lynn ran to first, rounded the base, and keeps running until she slides into second.

Lynn ran to first, rounded the base, and kept running until she slid into second.

1. When your cholesterol count is too high, adjusting your diet and exercise level reduced it.
2. After you lowered your cholesterol rate, you decrease the chances of heart attack and stroke.
3. First eliminate saturated fats from your diet; then you should consume more whole grains and raw vegetables.
4. To avoid saturated fats, substitute turkey and chicken for beef, and you should use cholesterol-free salad dressing and cooking oil.
5. A regular program of aerobic exercise, such as walking or swimming, improves your cholesterol rate and made you feel much healthier.

Keep a sentence or related sentences consistent in subject and voice.

When a verb is in the **active voice**, the subject names the actor: *Linda passed the peas*. When a verb is in the **passive voice**, the subject names the receiver of the action: *The peas were passed [by Linda]*. (See pp. 302–03.)

A shift in voice may sometimes help focus the reader’s attention on a single subject, as in *The candidate campaigned vigorously and was nominated on the first ballot*. However, most shifts in voice also involve shifts in subject. They are unnecessary and confusing.

Inconsistent Internet newsgroups cover an enormous range of topics for discussion. Forums for meeting people with like interests are provided in these groups.

Revised Internet newsgroups cover an enormous range of topics for discussion and provide forums for meeting people with like interests.

EXERCISE 20.3 Revising: Shifts in subject and voice

Make the following sentences consistent in subject and voice. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

At the reunion they ate hot dogs and volleyball was played.

At the reunion they ate hot dogs and played volleyball.

1. If students learn how to study efficiently, much better grades will be made on tests.
2. Conscientious students begin to prepare for tests immediately after the first class is attended.
3. Before each class all reading assignments are completed, and the students outline the material and answer any study questions.
4. In class they listen carefully and good notes are taken.
5. Questions are asked by the students when they do not understand the professor.

Keep a quotation or a question consistently direct or indirect.

Direct quotations or questions report the exact words of a quotation or question:

“I am the greatest,” bragged Muhammad Ali.

In his day few people asked, “Is he right?”

Indirect quotations or questions report that someone said or asked something, but not in the exact words:

Muhammad Ali bragged that he was the greatest.

In his day few people asked whether he was right.

Shifts between direct and indirect quotations or questions are difficult to follow.

Shift in quotation Kapek reported that the rats avoided the maze and “as of this writing, none responds to conditioning.”

Revised (indirect) Kapek reported that the rats avoided the maze and that as of his writing none responded to conditioning.

Revised (direct) Kapek reported, “The rats avoid the maze. As of this writing, none responds to conditioning.”

Shift in question The reader wonders whether the experiment failed or did it perhaps succeed?

Revised (indirect) The reader wonders whether the experiment failed or whether it perhaps succeeded.

Revised (direct) Did the experiment fail? Or did it perhaps succeed?

For more on quotations, see pages 444–46 (commas with signal phrases such as *she said*), 469–75 (quotation marks), and 623–28 (integrating quotations into your writing). For more on questions, see pages 427–28.

EXERCISE 20.4 Revising: Shifts in direct and indirect quotations and questions

Revise each of the following sentences twice, once to make it consistently direct, once to make it consistently indirect. You will have to guess at the exact wording of direct quotations and questions that are now stated indirectly. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

We all wonder what the next decade will bring and will we thrive or not?

Direct: What will the next decade bring? Will we thrive or not?

Indirect: We all wonder what the next decade will bring and whether we will thrive or not.

1. One anthropologist says that the functions of marriage have changed and “nowhere more dramatically than in industrialized cultures.”
2. The question even arises of whether siblings may marry and would the union be immoral?
3. The author points out, “Sibling marriage is still illegal everywhere in the United States” and that people are still prosecuted under the law.
4. She says that incest could be considered a universal taboo and “the questions asked about the taboo vary widely.”
5. Some ask is the taboo a way of protecting the family or whether it may be instinctive.

EXERCISE 20.5 Revising: Shifts

Revise the following paragraph to eliminate unnecessary shifts in person, number, tense, mood, and voice. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Driving in snow need not be dangerous if you practice a few rules. First, one should avoid fast starts, which prevent the wheels from gaining traction and may result in the car’s getting stuck. Second, drive more slowly than usual, and you should pay attention to the feel of the car: if the steering seemed unusually loose or the wheels did not seem to be grabbing the road, slow down. Third, avoid fast stops, which lead to skids. One should be alert for other cars and intersections that may necessitate that the brakes be applied suddenly. If you need to slow down, the car’s momentum can be reduced by downshifting as well as by applying the brakes. When braking, press the pedal to the floor only if you have antilock brakes; otherwise, the pedal should be pumped in short bursts. If you feel the car skidding, the brakes should be released and the wheel should be turned into the direction of the skid, and then the brakes should be pressed or pumped again. If one repeated these motions, the skid would be stopped and the speed of the car would be reduced.

Note See page 381 for an exercise involving shifts along with sentence fragments, comma splices, and other sentence errors.
<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help and additional exercises on pronoun reference.
Clear reference

Principal causes of unclear pronoun reference

▼ **More than one possible antecedent** (facing page and below):

Confusing To keep birds from eating seeds, soak them in blue food coloring.

Clear To keep birds from eating seeds, soak the seeds in blue food coloring.

▼ **Antecedent too far away** (p. 352):

Confusing Employees should consult with their supervisor who require personal time.

Clear Employees who require personal time should consult with their supervisor.

▼ **Antecedent only implied** (p. 353):

Confusing Many children begin reading on their own by watching television, but this should probably be discounted in government policy.

Clear Many children begin reading on their own by watching television, but such self-instruction should probably be discounted in government policy.

See also pages 354–56.

Match *bank* . . . *owes*

Matches *bank*

Matches *will fail*

Matches *customers*

Matches *customers*

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