

Pronouns

Introduction

Anna decided at the beginning of Anna's first semester of college that Anna would run for thirty minutes every day. Anna knew that Anna would be taking a literature class with a lot of reading, so instead of buying print copies of all the novels Anna's teacher assigned, Anna bought the audiobooks. That way Anna could listen to the audiobooks as Anna ran.

Did this paragraph feel awkward to you? Let's try it again using pronouns:

Anna decided at the beginning of **her** first semester of college that **she** would run for thirty minutes every day. **She** knew that **she** would be taking a literature class with a lot of reading, so instead of buying hard copies of all the novels **her** teacher assigned, Anna bought the audiobooks. That way **she** could listen to **them** as **she** ran.

This second paragraph is much more natural. Instead of repeating nouns multiple times, we were able to use pronouns. You've likely hear the phrase "a pronoun replaces a noun"; this is *exactly* what a pronoun does. Because a pronoun is replacing a noun, its meaning is dependent on the noun that it is replacing. This noun is called the **antecedent**. Let's look at the two sentences we just read again:

- Because a pronoun is replacing a noun, **its** meaning is dependent on the noun that **it** is replacing. This noun is called an **antecedent**.

There are two pronouns here: *its* and *it*. *Its* and *it* both have the same antecedent: "a pronoun." Whenever you use a pronoun, you must also include its antecedent. Without the antecedent, your readers (or listeners) won't be able to figure out what the pronoun is referring to. Let's look at a couple of examples:

- Jason likes it when people look to him for leadership.
- Trini brushes her hair every morning.
- Billy often has to clean his glasses.
- Kimberly is a gymnast. She has earned several medals in different competitions.

So, what are the antecedents and pronouns in these sentences?

- *Jason* is the antecedent for the pronoun *him*.
- *Trini* is the antecedent for the pronoun *her*.
- *Billy* is the antecedent for the pronoun *his*.
- *Kimberly* is the antecedent for the pronoun *she*.

What Is a Pronoun?

- Pronouns make up a small subcategory of nouns. The distinguishing characteristic of pronouns is that they can be substituted for other nouns. For instance, if you're telling a story about your sister Sarah, the story will begin to sound repetitive if you keep repeating "Sarah" over and over again.
- Sarah has always loved fashion. Sarah announced that Sarah wants to go to fashion school.
- You could try to mix it up by sometimes referring to Sarah as "my sister," but then it sounds like you're referring to two different people.
- Sarah has always loved fashion. My sister announced that Sarah wants to go to fashion school.
- Instead, you can use the pronouns *she* and *her* to refer to Sarah.
- Sarah has always loved fashion. She announced that she wants to go to fashion school.

Types of Pronoun

Personal Pronouns

- There are a few different types of pronouns, and some pronouns belong to more than one category. *She* and *her* are known as **personal pronouns**. The other personal pronouns are *I* and *me*, *you*, *he* and *him*, *it*, *we* and *us*, and *they* and *them*. If you learned about pronouns in school, these are probably the words your teacher focused on. We'll get to the other types of pronouns in a moment.

Antecedents

- Pronouns are versatile. The pronoun *it* can refer to just about anything: a bike, a tree, a movie, a feeling. That's why you need an antecedent. An **antecedent** is a noun or noun phrase that you mention at the beginning of a sentence or story and later replace with a pronoun. In the examples below, the antecedent is highlighted and the pronoun that replaces it is bolded.
- My family drives me nuts, but I love **them**. The sign was too far away for Henry to read **it**. Sarah said **she** is almost finished with the application.
- In some cases, the antecedent doesn't need to be mentioned explicitly, as long as the context is totally clear. It's usually clear who the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *you* refer to based on who is speaking.
- It's also possible to use a pronoun before you mention the antecedent, but try to avoid doing it in long or complex sentences because it can make the sentence hard to follow.
- I love **them**, but my family drives me nuts.

Relative Pronouns

- Relative pronouns make up another class of pronouns. They are used to connect relative clauses to independent clauses. Often, they introduce additional information about something mentioned in the sentence. Relative pronouns include *that*, *what*, *which*, *who*, and *whom*. Traditionally, *who* refers to people, and *which* and *that* refer to animals or things.
- The woman **who** called earlier didn't leave a message. All the dogs **that** got adopted today will be loved. My car , **which** is nearly twenty years old, still runs well.
- Whether you need commas with *who*, *which*, and *that* depends on whether the clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive.

Who vs. Whom—Subject and Object Pronouns

- Now that we've talked about relative pronouns, let's tackle the one that causes the most confusion: *who* vs. *whom*. *Who* is a subject pronoun, like *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, and *they*. *Whom* is an object pronoun, like *me*, *him*, *her*, *us* and *them*. When the pronoun is the object of a verb or preposition, the object form is the one you want. Most people don't have much trouble with the objective case of personal pronouns because they usually come immediately after the verb or preposition that modifies it.
- Please mail it **to I**.
- **Please mail it to me.**
- Ms. Higgins **caught they** passing notes.
- Ms. Higgins **caught them** passing notes.
- Is this cake for **we**?
- Is this cake for **us**?
- *Whom* is trickier, though, because it usually comes *before* the verb or preposition that modifies it.
- **Whom** did you speak **to** earlier?
- A man, **whom** I have never **seen** before, was asking about you.
- **Whom** should I say is calling?
- One way to test whether you need *who* or *whom* is to try substituting a personal pronoun. Find the place where the personal pronoun would normally go and see whether the subject or object form makes more sense.
- **Who/whom** did you speak **to** earlier? Did you speak to *he/him* earlier?
- A man, **whom** I have never **seen** before, was asking about you. Have I seen *he/him* before?
- **Whom** should I say is calling? Should I say *she/her* is calling?
- If the object pronoun (him or her) sounds right, use *whom*. If the subject pronoun (he or she) sounds right, use *who*.
- Before we move on, there's one more case where the choice between subject and object pronouns can be confusing. Can you spot the problem in the sentences below?
- Henry is meeting Sarah and I this afternoon. There are no secrets between you and I. It doesn't matter to him or I.
- In each of the sentences above, the pronoun *I* should be *me*. If you remove the other name or pronoun from the sentence, it becomes obvious.
- Henry is meeting I this afternoon. No one keeps secrets from I. It doesn't matter to I.

Demonstrative Pronouns

- *That, this, these* and *those* are demonstrative pronouns. They take the place of a noun or noun phrase that has already been mentioned.
- *This* is used for singular items that are nearby. *These* is used for multiple items that are nearby. The distance can be physical or metaphorical.
- Here is a letter with no return address. Who could have sent this? What a fantastic idea! This is the best thing I've heard all day. If you think gardenias smell nice, try smelling these.
- *That* is used for singular items that are far away. *Those* is used for multiple items that are far away. Again, the distance can be physical or metaphorical.
- A house like that would be a nice place to live. Some new flavors of soda came in last week. Why don't you try some of those? Those aren't swans, they're geese.

Indefinite Pronouns

- Indefinite pronouns are used when you need to refer to a person or thing that doesn't need to be specifically identified. Some common indefinite pronouns are *one, other, none, some, anybody, everybody*, and *no one*.
- Everybody was late to work because of the traffic jam. It matters more to some than others. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
- When indefinite pronouns function as subjects of a sentence or clause, they usually take singular verbs.

Reflexive and Intensive Pronouns

- Reflexive pronouns end in *-self* or *-selves*: *myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves*.
- Use a reflexive pronoun when both the subject and object of a verb refer to the same person or thing.
- Henry cursed himself for his poor eyesight. They booked themselves a room at the resort. I told myself it was nothing.
- Intensive pronouns look the same as reflexive pronouns, but their purpose is different. Intensive pronouns add emphasis.
- I built this house myself. Did you yourself see Loretta spill the coffee?
- "I built this house" and "I built this house myself" mean almost the same thing. But "myself" emphasizes that I personally built the house—I didn't hire someone else to do it for me. Likewise, "Did you see Loretta spill the coffee?" and "Did you yourself see Loretta spill the coffee?" have similar meanings. But "yourself" makes it clear that the person asking wants to know whether you actually witnessed the incident or whether you only heard it described by someone else.
- Occasionally, people are tempted to use *myself* where they should use *me* because it sounds a little fancier. Don't fall into that trap! If you use a *-self* form of a pronoun, make sure it matches one of the uses above.

- Please call Sarah or myself if you are going to be late. Loretta, Henry, and myself are pleased to welcome you to the neighborhood.

Possessive Pronouns

- Possessive pronouns come in two flavors: limiting and absolute. *My, your, its, his, her, our, their* and *whose* are used to show that something belongs to an antecedent.
- Sarah is working on **her** application. Just put me back on **my** bike. The students practiced **their** presentation after school.
- The absolute possessive pronouns are *mine, yours, his, hers, ours, and theirs*. The absolute forms can be substituted for the thing that belongs to the antecedent.
- Are you finished with your application? Sarah already finished hers. The blue bike is mine. I practiced my speech and the students practiced theirs.
- Some possessive pronouns are easy to mix up with similar-looking contractions. Remember, possessive personal pronouns don't include apostrophes.

Interrogative Pronouns

- Interrogative pronouns are used in questions. The interrogative pronouns are *who, what, which, and whose*.
- Who wants a bag of jelly beans? What is your name? Which movie do you want to watch? Whose jacket is this?

REFERENCES

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