Using Pronouns Clearly

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Because a pronoun REFERS BACK to a noun or TAKES THE PLACE OF that noun, you have to use the correct pronoun so that your reader clearly understands which noun your pronoun is referring to.

Therefore, pronouns should:

1. AGREE in NUMBER

If the pronoun takes the place of a singular noun, you have to use a singular pronoun.

If a student parks a car on campus, he or she has to buy a parking sticker.

(NOT: If a student parks a car on campus, they have to buy a parking sticker.)

REMEMBER: The words EVERYBODY, ANYBODY, ANYONE, EACH, NEITHER, NOBODY, SOMEONE, A PERSON, etc. are singular and take singular pronouns.

Everybody ought to do his or her best. (NOT: their best)

Neither of the girls brought her umbrella. (NOT: their umbrellas)

NOTE: Many people find the construction "his or her" wordy, so if it is possible to use a plural noun as your antecedent so that you can use "they" as your pronoun, it may be wise to do so. If you do use a singular noun and the context makes the gender clear, then it is permissible to use just "his" or "her" rather than "his or her." See our handout on Non-sexist Language for more information.

2. AGREE in PERSON

If you are writing in the "first person" (I), don't confuse your reader by switching to the "second person" (you) or "third person" (he, she, they, it, etc.). Similarly, if you are using the "second person," don't switch to "first" or "third."

When a person comes to class, he or she should have his or her homework ready.

(NOT: When a person comes to class, you should have your homework ready.)

This page is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_pronuse.html.

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3. REFER CLEARLY to a specific noun.

Don't be vague or ambiguous.

NOT: Although the motorcycle hit the tree, it was not damaged. (Is "it" the motorcycle or the tree?)

NOT: I don't think they should show violence on TV. (Who are "they"?)

NOT: Vacation is coming soon, which is nice. (What is nice, the vacation or the fact that it is coming soon?)

NOT: George worked in a national forest last summer. This may be his life's work. (What word does "this" refer to?)

NOT: If you put this sheet in your notebook, you can refer to it. (What does "it" refer to, the sheet or your notebook?)