

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 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 best. (NOT: their best)

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

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 should have his homework ready.

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

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: *If you put this sheet in your notebook, you can refer to it. (What does “it” refer to, the sheet or your notebook?)*

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