

RULES FOR FINDING AND FIXING PRONOUN AGREEMENT ERRORS

Understand the problem.

Whenever you use a **personal pronoun** like *she*, *it*, or *they*, you first have to have an **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 *Gustavo*. Pronouns like *he* will keep you from repeating *Gustavo, Gustavo, Gustavo* over and over again.

The pronoun must agree with its antecedent. To navigate this agreement successfully, you will need to know these singular and plural pronoun forms:

SINGULAR	PLURAL
he, she, it	they
him, her, it	them
his, her, hers, its	their, theirs
himself, herself, itself	themselves

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 won't need to debate whether you need the singular or plural form. The spoken English you have heard will help you make the right pronoun choice when you write.

Use the correct pronoun in tricky situations.

English unfortunately includes some *special* agreement situations. These will require your more careful attention.

KNOW HOW EACH AND EVERY CAN 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 = 2 things, or a plural antecedent.

Read these examples:

The woodpecker **and** his 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 and ear-pleasing 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 as well.

Watch what happens:

The cowboy **and** his horse drank **their** fill at the desert oasis.

Each cowboy and horse drank **his** fill at the desert oasis.

Every cowboy, horse, pack mule, trail hand, and cook drank **his** fill at the desert oasis.

Each and **every** will also change the verbs that have to agree:

Whenever a diner walks in five minutes before closing, the cook **and** waitress **sigh** and **roll** their eyes.

Whenever a diner walks in five minutes before closing, every cook and waitress sighs and rolls her eyes.

UNDERSTAND HOW CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS CAN CONFUSE PRONOUN AGREEMENT.

Exercise caution when you use **correlative conjunctions** like *either ... or*, *neither ... nor*, and *not only ... but also*. Because correlative conjunctions have two parts, you'll 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* and the *handpicked flowers*. Use the *closer* of the two antecedents to determine if you need a singular or plural pronoun.

RECOGNIZE THE PROBLEMS THAT SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS CAN CAUSE.

Indefinite pronouns, a special class of words, will often be antecedents. Some indefinite pronouns—despite the illogic—are always singular:

SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS
each, either, neither
anybody, anyone, anything
everybody, everyone, everything
nobody, no one, nothing
somebody, someone, something

When people talk, logic wins, so you will hear plural pronouns with these words. But when you write, words like *everyone*, *somebody*, and *nothing* are singular and require a singular pronoun for agreement.

Everyone on the planet deserves clean water to quench ~~their~~ **his** thirst.

Can you believe it? **Somebody** left ~~their~~ **her** dog in a hot car with the windows rolled up!

Nothing is in ~~their~~ **its** place after the violent shaking from the earthquake.

Because this group of indefinite pronouns is singular, your choice of singular pronoun might strike some people as sexist. If, for example, you say,

Everybody should take **his** seat.

then the females present might take offense that you have excluded **them**. Or if you say,

No one needs **her** money because the food is free.

then the males might wonder why **they** have to pay.

One solution is to include both genders with constructions like **he or she**, **him or her**, **his or hers**, or **him or herself**.

The problem with using these inclusive constructions is that they are awkward. Although you do maintain pronoun agreement and avoid offending one gender, these constructions wreck the cadence of a good sentence.

Read a piece of professional writing—an essay, a movie or book review, an opinion piece in the newspaper—and you'll notice that real writers, those folks who engage audiences that number in the thousands or millions, will seldom, if ever, use a phrase like **he or she**.

Instead, professional writers might revise the sentence so that a pronoun is unnecessary. Sometimes, they make the antecedent plural so that they can use the natural-sounding **they**, **them**, or **their**. Or they might decide to alternate **he** and **she** in the piece so that both genders get mentioned.

Using **he or she** or **him or her** is *technically* correct. But it's also bad style. Avoid these constructions if you can.

REALIZE THAT NOT ALL INDEFINITE PRONOUNS ARE STRICTLY SINGULAR.

Another group of indefinite pronouns are singular or plural, depending on the information from the **prepositional phrase** that follows.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS THAT CAN BE 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.

KNOW HOW TO HANDLE PRONOUN AGREEMENT WITH COLLECTIVE NOUNS.

Collective nouns name groups [things] composed of members [usually people].

Here are examples:

COLLECTIVE NOUNS

army, audience, board, cabinet, class
committee, company, corporation, council
department, faculty, family, firm, group
jury, majority, minority, navy
public, school, senate, team, 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, when Grandma prepares her delicious chicken pot pie.

The **committee** decided to spend *its* budget on surplus 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.

Look what happens:

When Grandpa begins boiling liver, the **family** quickly find other plans for *their* dinner.

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 a natural-sounding plural pronoun.

The ~~team~~ **football players** [or *athletes*, or *teammates*] 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 an ear-pleasing plural pronoun.

When Grandpa has dinner duty, the family **members** stretch *their* budgets 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.

