

# THE ANTECEDENT

## Recognize an antecedent when you find one.

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The English language includes **pronouns**, words such as *she*, *it*, or *they*. Pronouns are generic words that have little meaning on their own. If you hear a friend say, "Wow, she is beautiful," you know your friend is referring to a singular, feminine being or object, but with just the pronoun *she*, you do not know if the comment concerns a woman, a cheetah, an antique doll, or an automobile. You cannot picture the *she* until you know *what* this pronoun refers to.

In grammar vocabulary, the *antecedent* is the word, **phrase**, or **clause** that a pronoun can replace.

### ANTECEDENTS AND PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Often, an antecedent is the word, **phrase**, or **clause** that you replace with a third-person **personal pronoun**:

| THIRD-PERSON PERSONAL PRONOUNS        |
|---------------------------------------|
| he, him, his, himself                 |
| she, her, hers, herself               |
| it, its, itself                       |
| they, them, their, theirs, themselves |

Here are examples:

**Adeline** bit **her** lip.

**Adeline** = antecedent; **her** = personal pronoun.

Our carnivorous **friends** will not attend the picnic because **they** despise tofu hotdogs and black bean burgers.

**Friends** = antecedent; **they** = personal pronoun.

When **Kris** sprained his ankle, Coach Ames replaced **him** with Jasper, a much slower runner.

**Kris** = antecedent; **him** = personal pronoun.

**Eating with your mouth closed** has several benefits. Most importantly, **it** keeps people from turning away in disgust.

**Eating with your mouth closed** = phrase as antecedent; **it** = personal pronoun.

Karline hopes **that her roommates remember to walk the new puppy**. **It** will mean less urine to mop up when she gets home.

**That her roommates remember to walk the new puppy** = clause as antecedent; **it** = personal pronoun.

## ANTECEDENTS AND DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS

Other times, the antecedent might be the word, **phrase**, or **clause** that a **demonstrative pronoun** replaces.

| DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS   |
|--------------------------|
| this, that, these, those |

Read the examples below:

Jackson rides his **skateboard** to work. Now **this** is an eco-friendly mode of transportation!

**Skateboard** = antecedent; **this** = demonstrative pronoun.

You must practice **throwing unwieldy objects** and **catching heavy things**. **Those** are the skills that will make you a successful chainsaw juggler.

**Throwing unwieldy objects, catching heavy things** = phrases as antecedents; **those** = demonstrative pronoun.

Francine prays **that the neighbors will keep their barking dog inside**. **That** will allow her to get a good night's sleep.

**That the neighbors will keep their barking dog inside** = clause as antecedent; **that** (the second one) = demonstrative pronoun.

## ANTECEDENTS AND RELATIVE PRONOUNS

Sometimes the antecedent is the point of reference for a **relative pronoun**.

| RELATIVE PRONOUNS             |
|-------------------------------|
| who, whom, whose, that, which |

Read these examples:

**Principal Meyers, whose** nose hair curled outside his nostrils, delivered the morning announcements.

**Principal Meyers** = antecedent; **whose** = relative pronoun.

The **dish that** contains the leftover squid eyeball stew is not microwave safe.

**Dish** = antecedent; **that** = relative pronoun.

**Eating ice cream for dinner, which** might not be nutritionally smart, is what Teresa wanted after her long day of waitressing.

**Eating ice cream for dinner** = antecedent; **which** = relative pronoun.

## Some antecedents can make pronoun agreement tricky.

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Usually, maintaining agreement between antecedents and pronouns is easy. A singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun, like this:

The **cat** yowled **its** happiness for tuna.

**Cat** = singular antecedent; **its** = singular pronoun.

And a plural antecedent requires a plural pronoun, like this:

The **cats** yowled **their** happiness for tuna.

**Cats** = plural antecedent; **their** = plural pronoun.

Sometimes, however, establishing agreement can be tricky. Consider the situations below.

## **EACH AND EVERY**

When you join two or more singular **nouns** with **and**, you create a plural antecedent:

The beetle **and** baby snake were thankful that they escaped the lawnmower blade.

**Beetle + snake** = plural antecedent; **they** = plural pronoun.

If, however, you include **each** or **every** in front, the antecedent becomes *singular* and will thus require a singular pronoun:

**Each** beetle **and** baby snake was thankful that **it** escaped the lawnmower blade.

**Each + beetle + baby snake** = singular antecedent; **it** = singular pronoun.

No matter how many nouns you include, if you have **each** or **every** in front, the antecedent is singular and needs a singular pronoun for agreement:

**Each** beetle, baby snake, worm, centipede, lizard, grasshopper, and toad was thankful that **it** escaped the lawnmower blade.

**Each + beetle + baby snake + worm + centipede + lizard + grasshopper + toad** = singular antecedent; **it** = singular pronoun.

## CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS

When you use **correlative conjunctions** like *either ... or*, *neither ... nor*, and *not only ... but also*, only the *second* antecedent counts for agreement.

If, for example, the second antecedent is plural, then the pronoun that follows must be plural:

**Not only** Freddy the nose picker **but also** grateful shoppers replenished **their** supply of tissues during the drugstore sale.

But if the second antecedent is singular, then you need a singular pronoun to maintain agreement:

**Not only** grateful shoppers **but also** Freddy the nose picker replenished **his** supply of tissues during the drugstore sale.

## SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

**Indefinite pronouns**, a special class of words, will often be antecedents. Some indefinite pronouns—despite the illogic—are singular and will often require a singular pronoun for agreement.

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

Read these examples:

**Neither** of Jasmine's boyfriends knows that **he** has competition.

**Each** of my sisters believes that **her** potato salad recipe is Dad's favorite.

**Everything** in the serving bowls smells delicious. We hope it tastes good too!

Indefinite pronouns that refer to people—those that end in **body** or **one**, for example—are trickier. When you read, you will notice that writers have different strategies for handling these words.

In older publications, you will find writers exclusively using a masculine personal pronoun (**he**, **him**, **his**, or **himself**) to establish agreement with a singular indefinite pronoun (such as **everyone**):

When Professor Duncan shouted, "Time is up!" **everyone** set down **his** pen and closed **his** exam book.

Excluding half the human race was deemed unfair, so in the late twentieth century, writers tried to give masculine and feminine singular pronouns equal use, like this:

When Professor Duncan shouted, "Time is up!" **everyone** set down **his or her** pen and closed **his or her** exam book.

Constructions like **he or she** and **him or her** created reading experiences that were truly clunky. Plus, some individuals wanted other people to refer to them with plural pronouns like **they**. As a result, you can now find writers producing sentences like this:

When Professor Duncan shouted, "Time is up!" **everyone** set down **their** pens and closed **their** exam books.

Other contemporary writers believe that agreement still matters, so their solution is to avoid singular indefinite pronouns altogether, choosing plural **nouns** instead:

When Professor Duncan shouted, "Time is up!" the **students** set down **their** pens and closed **their** exam books.

## COLLECTIVE NOUNS

**Class**, **family**, **jury**, and **team** are examples of **collective nouns**. This type of noun names groups composed of two or more members. As we all know, sometimes a group acts in unison, as one unit, with every member doing the

same thing at the same time. On other occasions, however, the members of the group have their own agendas and are pursuing individual goals.

When a collective noun is an antecedent, the behavior of its members determines whether you need a singular or plural pronoun.

If all the members are doing the same thing at the same time, then the collective noun is singular and requires a singular pronoun for agreement:

The Larsen **family** does **its** shopping every Saturday.

In the quiet auditorium, the **class** took **its** chemistry final.

Our **team** roared **its** displeasure when the opposition scored another touchdown.

If, however, the members of the collective noun are acting individually, you indicate that change by using a plural pronoun:

In the produce section, the Larsen **family** began arguing about the vegetables that **they** would prefer for dinner.

After the long and difficult exam, the **class** returned home, some to pack for winter break, some to study for **their** Thursday exams.

During the off season, the **team** spend **their** afternoons as they please, happy to escape the demands of the coaches.

## **SCHOOLS, BUSINESSES, AND ORGANIZATIONS**

Many people might attend a school, work for a business, or volunteer at an organization, but when the name of that school, business, or organization is the antecedent, you must ignore—for the purpose of agreement—all the people involved and use a singular pronoun.

Consider these examples:

When **Weaver High School** won the regional football championship on a technicality, we sneaked onto campus the next evening and cut all four legs off **its** tiger mascot.

Save room for dessert, for **Tito's Taco Palace** offers **its** diners fried ice cream with habanero jelly.

**PencilGang International** met **its** fundraising goal last year, so free pencils will be distributed to needy writers worldwide.

