

Mount Saint Vincent University
Writing Resource Centre

Handout Topic: Making Pronoun References Clear

What is a pronoun?

A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun in a sentence. Common pronouns in the English language include *he, she, it, they, we, you, I, that, this, who, and which*. Using pronouns adds some variety to a sentence: it means a writer need not repeat the same noun over and over. However, using pronouns properly means making clear to what the pronoun refers. The noun that a pronoun refers to in a sentence is called the pronoun's antecedent.

In general, pronouns should always appear as close to their antecedent as possible, and should refer only to a single antecedent to minimize confusion.

e.g. We removed all the glassware from the kitchen and cleaned it. (multiple antecedents: did you clean the glassware or the kitchen?)

e.g. We removed and cleaned all the glassware in the kitchen. (clear)

e.g. Mike told Jim that he was mistaken. (unclear; multiple antecedents)

e.g. Mike told Jim, "I am mistaken." (clear)

Pronouns must agree in number (i.e. singular or plural) and in person (i.e. first person, third person, etc.) with their antecedent.

e.g. If a student fails a course, they must take the course again. (pronoun *they* does not agree in number with the antecedent *student*)

e.g. If a student fails a course, he or she must take the course again. (correct)

e.g. Once someone fails a course more than once, you are placed on academic probation. (pronoun *you* does not match antecedent *someone* in person)

e.g. Once someone fails a course more than once, he or she is placed on academic probation. (correct)

A pronoun that does not specifically refer to a noun or other pronoun can confuse the reader. If the antecedent for a pronoun is implied but not made explicit, the reader is left to guess at the antecedent. This sort of broad reference is more typical with pronouns like *that*, *this*, *it*, and *which*, when they are used to refer to an idea or concept expressed in the previous paragraph, clause, or sentence.

e.g. Sally and Bill made repeated visits to the Writing Centre and always started written assignments early, resulting in improved grades by the end of the semester. This was soon copied by other students. (pronoun *this* has no clear antecedent)

e.g. Sally and Bill made repeated visits to the Writing Centre and always started written assignments early, resulting in improved grades by the end of the semester. This strategy was soon copied by other students. (clearer)

e.g. Sally and Bill made repeated visits to the Writing Centre and always started written assignments early, resulting in improved grades by the end of the semester. Making efforts to improve writing skills was a strategy soon copied by other students. (clearest)

The pronouns *it*, *they*, and *you*, while used rather indefinitely in everyday speech and in informal situations, should not be used in this way for academic and formal writing.

e.g. In France they eat a large meal at noon. (informal)

e.g. Many people in France eat a large meal at noon. (formal)

e.g. In the 1800s you had to have ample provisions to survive a Canadian winter. (informal)

e.g. In the 1800s a person had to have ample provisions to survive a Canadian winter. (formal)

Exercise: Identify the unclear pronoun references in the following paragraph. Where necessary, rewrite the sentence so that all pronoun references are clear.

At the Writing Centre, you can receive help on any writing assignment. It can make your writing stronger by discussing it with someone else. This will lead to a greater understanding of the proper mechanics and style expected in academic writing. This is an important part of the writing process, and they spend a good deal of time making sure you understand the expectations of written assignments. Using it will definitely make your writing skills stronger, and that will give you greater confidence for your next assignment.