

Making Pronoun References Clear

Pronouns substitute for nouns. The word a pronoun refers to is called its antecedent. A pronoun should refer clearly to its antecedent. A pronoun's reference will be unclear if it is ambiguous, implied, vague or indefinite.

A. Ambiguous Reference

An ambiguous reference occurs when the pronoun could refer to two possible antecedents.

The client told James that he had to come to therapy.
(Who has to come to therapy- the client or James?)

The following revision eliminates the ambiguity.

The client told James, "You have to come to therapy."

B. Implied Reference

A pronoun must refer to a specific antecedent, not to a word that is implied but not present in the sentence.

After braiding Ann's hair, Sue decorated **them** with ribbons.

The pronoun *them* refers to Ann's braids (implied by the term braiding), but the word braids did not appear in the sentence.

After braiding Ann's hair, Sue decorated **the braids** with ribbons.

Possessives cannot serve as antecedents.

In Nikki's case file, **she** describes how Ms. Jones abuses substances.

The pronoun *she* does not refer to Nikki but refers to Nikki's case file.

In Nikki's case file, **Nikki** describes how Ms. Jones abuses substances.

C. Vague Reference: **this, that, which**

The pronouns *this*, *that* and *which* should not refer vaguely to earlier word groups or ideas. These pronouns should refer to specific

antecedents.

When a pronoun's reference is too vague, replace the pronoun with a noun.

More and more often, especially in large cities, we are finding ourselves victims of serious crimes. We learn to accept **this** with minor complaints.

More and more often, especially in large cities, we are finding ourselves victims of serious crimes. We learn to accept **our fate** with minor complaints. (The pronoun *this* is replaced by the noun *fate*).

OR

When a pronoun's reference is too vague, supply an antecedent to which the pronoun clearly refers.

Sue and Patsy were both too young to have acquired much wisdom, **which** accounts for their rash actions.

Sue and Patsy were both too young to have acquired much wisdom, **a fact** which accounts for their rash decisions. (The pronoun *which* clearly refers to the supplied antecedent, *fact*).

D. Indefinite Reference: they, it, you

The pronouns *they*, *it*, *you*, should not refer to indefinite word groups or ideas.

The pronoun **they** should refer to a specific antecedent. Do not use they to refer indefinitely to persons who have not been specifically mentioned.

A list of ways to help a rape survivor is included with the orientation kit. For example, **they** suggest speaking to the survivor in calm tones.

A list of ways to help a rape survivor is included with the orientation kit. For example, the **St. John's Rape Crisis Centre** suggests speaking to the survivor in calm tones.

The word **it** should not be used indefinitely in sentence construction.

“In the file report **it** says that...”

The file report points out that ...

The pronoun **you** is appropriate when the writer is addressing the reader directly. Usually in formal contexts, the indefinite **you** (meaning “anyone in general”) is inappropriate.

In Newfoundland, **you** don’t have to look far to find long waiting lists for counselling.

In Newfoundland, **one** doesn’t have to look far to find long waiting lists for counselling.

OR

If the pronoun **one** seems stilted, the writer might recast the sentence:

Newfoundlanders do not have to look far to find long waiting lists for counselling.

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