

A Guide to Ambiguous Pronoun Usage in English

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Ambiguous pronoun connections in writing create the serious problem of multiple interpretation. Since pronouns must refer back to someone or something, the writer must establish the connection between them and the words they refer to. Simply stated, pronouns function in sentences as replacements for nouns. Yet their usage often creates problems for both native and nonnative speakers and writers. Since English pronoun usage changes with the social structure of English-speaking cultures, we need to update our understanding of the function of these little reference words. The following discussion focuses on five forms of pronoun ambiguity found in the writing of both native and nonnative speakers.

However, not all pronouns create serious problems with ambiguity or unclear references. So before we begin to analyze the problems of ambiguity, a list of the most important categories of pronouns and their usage may prove useful.

1. Demonstrative (they demonstrate something):

this, that, these, those

2. Indefinite (general)

any, each, everybody, everyone, some

3. Interrogative (for questions)

who, which, what

4. Personal pronouns

he, she, I we, you, it, they

I. First of all, serious ambiguity arises when pronouns fail to agree with their antecedents in gender and number. An antecedent is a noun that appears before the pronoun. So singular or plural forms must be distinguished from one another: *he--his*, *she--hers*, *they--theirs*, and so on. The following examples clarify this process.

a. singular/gender: *Sally must review her lines before the play begins* (*her*, singular refers to Sally: same gender).

b. plural/gender: *Sally and her friends must review their lines before the play begins* (*their*, plural clearly refers to Sally and her friends)

Most ambiguous references concerning singular/plural occur with only a few pronouns; the most problematic group includes *each*, *either*, *everyone*, *neither*, *nobody*,

or *a person*. All of these forms take a singular pronoun.

- a. *Each man can choose his own weapon.*
- b. *Each woman has a right to be her own attorney.*
- c. *neither of the men would confess to his crime*
- d. *neither of the two managers would lower her standards.*

Note that all of the pronouns in the above sentences refer to specific situations. Therefore, the language cannot be regarded as "sexist." For example, "a" actually refers to a male while "b" indicates a female.

II. However, sexist language appears in print on a daily basis in English-speaking cultures. Language which focuses exclusively on males also creates ambiguity. As social conditions in the English-speaking countries have changed, so too the pronoun usage has changed. Conventional usage has now set acceptable standards to avoid sexist language; the pronoun system must include both females and males. Consider the following example written over one hundred years ago.

Original: *The radical invents the views. When he has worn them out, the conservative adopts them.*

This sentence by Mark Twain clearly suggests that the radical is male. Times have changed since Mark's day, and we must find creative solutions to this problem. As one solution, try using the plural form.

Revision: *The radicals invent the views. When they have worn them out, the conservative adopts them.*

Original: *Every millionaire loves his money.*

Revision: *All millionaires love their money.*

As a second strategy, try dropping the pronoun altogether. This solution may work with some but not with others.

Original: *Every millionaire loves his money*

Revision: *Every millionaire loves money.*

Sometimes, we can avoid sexist language by simply dropping the unnecessary phrases or clauses.

Original: *If you need help, please ask a teacher. He may help you.*

Revision: *If you need help, please ask a teacher.*

III. In addition to sexist pronoun usage, the "empty it" creates awkward and unclear sentences in writing simply because it is a conversational form. This "it" serves as a subject. In such cases, the "it" really expresses no meaning and therefore is often labeled as "dummy" or "empty." We can frequently cure this problem by rewriting the sentence and using a strong verb.

Original: *It depends on the situation which managerial style should be used.*
(passive voice)

Revision: *The situation determines the managerial style*
(strong verb cures problem)

The following example combines the awkward use of "his/her" pronouns coupled with the empty "it."

Original: *If a delinquent child trusts his or her counselor after he or she gets out of jail, it makes it easier for him or her to adjust.*

(note that this it has no reference at all and that the overuse of "his/her" makes the sentence difficult to read) The plural form solves the problem and produces a more graceful sentence.

Revision: *If delinquent children trust their counselors, they will most likely adjust more smoothly to life in society after getting out of jail.*

Original: *After reading the executed man's full testimony, it struck me that we hanged an innocent man.* (the it has no reference).

Revision: *After reading the executed man's full testimony, I realized that we hanged an innocent man.* (proper subject and strong verb cures problem)

Original: *Even children in the ghetto could have a bright future if we could pass important bills of this kind (bills in the legislature). I think it will make a big difference in their lives.*

Revision: *Bills of this kind will ensure a bright future for all children living below the poverty level.* (strong verb cures problem)

IV. Moreover, pronouns like *this* and *that* require nouns behind them to avoid ambiguity. Sentences without such nouns will create ambiguity and difficulty for the readers. Thus, *this* and *that* cannot refer to a group of words expressing an idea or situation. Note the lack of clarity created by the faulty use of these two demonstrative pronouns.

Original: *Needless to say, this has really increased our problems.*

The *this* has no reference, so we must replace it with a subject.

Revision: *Needless to say, this stock failure has really increased our problems.*

Original: *The supervisor said that this would be just fine.*

Revision: *The supervisor said that this solution would be just fine.*

Sometimes, we can revise the sentence by eliminating the problematic pronoun and including the actual noun that the pronoun should refer to, as in the next example. Although the pronoun *that* generally creates less of a problem in terms of ambiguity than *this*, it can obscure meaning when used without an accompanying noun.

Original: *The accused denied that he ever said that.*

Revision: *The accused denied making such a statement.*

V. In addition, the plural pronoun *they* creates serious ambiguity if used carelessly. Because *they* can refer to almost all plural forms, it often creates unwanted ambiguity. In most cases, we can clarify the antecedent of *they* and solve the ambiguity; however, sometimes the pronoun problem results from awkward or unidiomatic sentence construction, and we will have to rewrite the sentence to clarify its message.

Original: *Teenage boys like to work on hot rod cars because they are fast and greasy.*

Revision: *Teenage boys like to work on fast and greasy hotrod cars.*

Original: *People who eat animal foods increase their risk of heart disease. They are usually full of fat.*

Revision: *People who eat animal foods increase their risk of heart disease. Animal foods are usually full of fat.*

In the above sentence, we had to eliminate the pronoun *they* altogether because it could also refer to *people*. However, the ambiguity in the next sentence will prove more difficult to resolve simply because it contains a muddled message.

Original: *When others make noisy outbursts in the family, mothers must determine if the conflict will affect their infants or if they should be thrown out.*

This sentence suggests throwing the babies out instead of the noise makers. In fact, the sentence contains a host of problems, the pronoun *they* being only one among

many others such as unclear message and inappropriate use of the passive voice in the final *if...*” clause. When faced with such a problem, we should rewrite the sentence for maximum clarity. But since we do not know precisely what the author intends, we must make guess at an interpretation.

Revision: *When noisy outbursts arise in the family, mothers with small infants should ask the noisy people to leave.*

ADVANCED LEVEL QUIZ

The following sentences contain many different forms of ambiguous pronoun usage. All of them have appeared in print in American newspapers, magazines, or essays. They represent typical mistakes made by native speakers. You may enjoy trying to eliminate the faulty references.

(keep in mind also that faulty references often result from overuse of weak verbs [be, is, are, was] and passive voice. Sometimes, the entire sentence must be rewritten to ensure clarity)

1. *And if the principle allowed after-school singing practice, it would give the children a place to go to let out their hostility.*
2. *When it comes to weak IQ (intelligence), the Turkey wins. It is a fact that turkeys will drown themselves by looking up too long when it is raining. It is strange, but when it rains, they stare at the sky without realizing it.*
3. *Every lawyer should fully understand his clients before defending him.*
4. *In today’s paper, it states that the new Congress will allow cutting of the forests.*
5. *An insurance agent sells his best policy to those people who have the finances to afford it.*
6. *If you have topics of a more universal nature, it may be sufficiently researched at a public library.*
7. *Fast food restaurants appeal to young people because they are fast, cheap, and greasy.*
8. *Today’s uniformed police force may have to qualify monthly for shooting ability. This is a significant exposure to airborne lead and other toxic metals.*
9. *In the American Culture, adolescents are getting conflicting messages. They are continually confused.*
10. *Nude dancing is now recognized as an art form and everyone on stage is expected to give his best performance. It will also help if each member would sing while dancing so that the critics can judge it.*
11. *When making a request from the desk sergeant, be certain that the background information is included. This will help him understand the purpose of the request and will allow them to get you the right stuff.*

12. Most people find it just as difficult to deliver bad news as they do when they have to receive it.
13. It has been proven superior to mace and tear gas, and it is a fact that it controls drunks, drug abusers, and attack dogs. Buy Pepperspray now!
14. It goes without saying that the police should follow the laws of the state just like anyone else.
15. In Hawaii, the beach bums collect rotting oysters for bait because they are stinky and attract surf fish.
16. The man cleaning the swimming pool told the young couple that it would be a good idea for them not to use so much sun tanning lotion.
17. When the soprano sang the last lines of La Traviata, it suddenly occurred to her that she actually enjoyed her first opera.
18. The conditions of being a college student have not changed during the last 50 years; it is still a lot of work if you want to get through it with good grades.
19. Every tourist director must lead his group of tourists through the major streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras.
20. While watching the chimpanzee poke a piece of straw into an ant hole to catch the little delicacies, it became apparent to the research team that chimps use tools to gather food.
21. When Wendy quietly informed the nurse that she was going to have a baby, the nurse claimed not to know about her current state of pregnancy.