Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Sentences are easier to understand when parts of speech grammatically agree with each other. When a pronoun and noun antecedent do not match, the meaning or clarity of ideas can be effected. This handout defines pronoun-antecedent agreement and provides common rules and considerations for pronoun-antecedent agreement. While these general principles are useful in helping you understand pronoun-antecedent agreement, always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

Definitions

A pronoun is a word that is substituted for a noun, such as she for the woman. An antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers. Antecedents often proceed the noun. The pronoun and antecedent typically agree when they match in terms of number (i.e., plural or singular) or person (i.e., first, second, or third person).

Incorrect: The nurses finished his rounds. (The antecedent is plural, and the pronoun is singular, so they do not agree)
Correct: The nurses finished their rounds. (Both the antecedent and pronoun are plural, so they agree.)

Incorrect: You should study, so he or she is ready for the test. (The antecedent is in second person, and the pronoun is in third person, so they do not agree.)
Correct: You should study, so you are ready for the test. (The antecedent and pronoun both use second person, so they agree.)

Rules

Treat antecedents joined by and as plural.

Incorrect: Ann and James goes to school.
Correct: Ann and James go to school.

When antecedents are joined by or or nor these words, the antecedent closest to the pronoun determines whether it is singular or plural.

Incorrect: Neither the phones nor the computer work.
Correct: Neither the phones nor the computer works.

Considerations

To address issues of gender bias, the pronouns they/them/their can generally take the place of singular nouns, as long as the antecedent is clear.

Correct: The writer tries to establish his or her own credibility.
Also Correct: The writer tries to establish their own credibility.

Avoid being ambiguous or confusing your audience. It should be clear which noun is the antecedent the pronoun is referencing.

Unclear: Matt told George that he didn't know anything about math. (Does he refer to Matt or George?)
Clear: Matt told George that George didn't know anything about math.