

The Writing Lab

Pronouns

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

Definitions and Examples: Pronouns are words that fill in for other nouns such as the following:

he/him/his	she/her/hers	I/me/mine	we/us/our	it/its/they/them
they/them	someone/somebody	anyone/anybody	everyone/everybody	no one/nobody

Example One: Because today is a snow day, I am sitting home working on my **computer**. **It** is a lot of fun.

In this example, the pronoun is “It.” But what noun is “It” replacing? Is the computer itself a lot of fun? Is sitting at home and working *on* the computer a lot of fun? Or, is having a snow day a lot of fun? When dealing with pronouns, think LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. A pronoun replaces the last noun that was mentioned that matches in terms of number and, in some cases, gender. Remember, a reader will look to *the last noun that was mentioned* to determine which noun the pronoun is replacing.

Example Two:

Physical therapists need to be very honest with their **clients**. **They** need to listen carefully to **their** answers.

In this instance, the pronoun “They” technically refers back to clients (“They” is a plural pronoun and immediately follows the plural noun “clients”) and “their” refers back to clients (clients’ answers). However, the pronouns (they/their) and what the pronouns represent (therapists/clients) get all mixed together.

Rewrite: Physical therapists need to be very honest and open with their clients. These medical professionals need to ask their patients questions and listen carefully to the answers.

Rewrite: Physical therapists need to be very honest and open with their clients, asking patients questions and listening carefully to the answers.

Example Three:

Computer engineers are faced with many challenges and **responsibilities**. **They** are often called upon to operate in stressful and fast-paced businesses and offices.

Again, the word “They” technically refers to the word “responsibilities.” Responsibilities aren’t human; they can’t be “called upon” to do anything.

Rewrite: Computer engineers are faced with many challenges and responsibilities, including being called upon to operate in stressful and fast-paced businesses and offices.

Tip:

Avoid beginning any sentence with a pronoun (He, She, They, It). Begin a sentence with the *actual* person/people/objects you are talking about, and use your pronoun later in the sentence:

He is a good guy, and you would really like **Chris**. (Are “He” and “Chris” the same person?)

versus

Chris is a good guy, and you would really like **him**. (The “him” is clear; “him” = Chris).

A Word about Personal Pronouns and Biological Sex

Traditionally, a personal pronoun used to describe a human being was expected to match the word it was replacing in terms of **biological sex** (male or female) and **number** (singular or plural). For example, all singular pronouns in English that refer to human beings are coded for biological sex (his/hers, he/she, him/her). While the word “it” is a pronoun that refers to a singular noun and doesn’t reference biological sex, “it” is reserved for non-human nouns. Increasingly, there are situations where the biological sex of a noun is either unknown or doesn’t fit into a purely male/female categorization.

So, what to do? Honestly, this issue of using they/them/their in place of singular personal pronouns (his/hers, he/she, and him/her) is controversial. Some readers will consider such usage as grammatically incorrect because the sentence includes both singular nouns and plural pronouns. Others will find the usage completely acceptable. In many cases, there is a very easy solution: Just write the entire sentence in the plural to begin with if possible. For example, note the two sentences below. There isn’t a great deal of difference in meaning between the two:

- **A writer** who wants to improve **his/her? their?** writing should go to the Writing Lab.
- **Writers** who want to improve **their** writing should go to the Writing Lab.

However, in cases where the noun must be singular and the biological sex of that noun is either unknown or doesn’t fit into male/female categorization, you have to choose. While more professional publications and organizations encourage the use of the plural pronouns (they/their/them) to refer to singular nouns, some people will find this practice grammatically incorrect regardless of your intentions to use accurate or inclusive language. I encourage my students to write the entire sentence in plural whenever possible. However, if that won’t work and if the biological sex of the noun is unknown or doesn’t fit into a male/female categorization, I support using the plural pronouns (they/them/their). I am all for good grammar; however, I support language that is inclusive and respectful of people’s identities more. However, this is ultimately a choice you need to make for yourself.