Some Guidelines on Using Pronouns

Pronoun Agreement/ Pronoun Reference/Pronouns and Gender-balanced Language

1. Pronoun agreement:

As the word suggests, pronouns are closely tied to nouns; in fact, pronouns take the place of nouns in order to reduce or avoid repetition. When replacing a noun with a pronoun, the writer must take care to have the pronoun agree in number (singular or plural) with the noun that it replaces.

Each building has its own manager. (*its* for the singular noun *building*).

Both buildings open their doors at 7 am. (*their* for the plural *buildings*)

Be sure to ignore any prepositional phrases that come between the noun and the pronoun that replaces it, since this may lead to an error.

The box of textbooks has its contents clearly marked. (the subject is *the box*, singular)

Boxes of textbooks have their contents clearly marked. (the subject is *boxes*, plural)

Note: if you choose to use the pronoun *they* to indicate a gender-neutral third-person singular, just be consistent in your usage.

A player with great training stands a good chance of beating *their* opponent. *They* can rely on hours of previous experience.

Also notice that when a pronoun refers to more than one noun joined by *or*, the word closest to the pronoun determines the agreement.

Either the dog or the two cats make an annual visit to the school.

Either the two cats or the dog makes an annual visit to the school.

1. Pronoun reference

Last, be sure to avoid confusion that results from unclear reference. Look at the following sentence:

Susan told her sister that *she* needed more sleep

Here, it is unclear which woman needs sleep. Try rewriting the sentence to establish clarity. Two approaches would be to use direct speech and to rephrase the sentence.

Susan said to her sister, “Carrie, you need more sleep.”

Susan looked at her sister’s tired face and told her she should get more sleep.

Work consulted: Wilson, Paige and Teresa Ferster Galzier. Writing Essentials: Exercises to Improve Spelling, Sentence Structure, Punctuation, and Writing. Heinle.

c. Pronouns and gender-balanced language:

Gender-fair language is committed to opening opportunities and aims for inclusion. Here are some strategies for writers:

**Balancing pronoun use**: Do not assume *he* as the default pronoun. To balance pronoun usage, you can:

Use “he” with “she” alternately or “s/he” or “she/he.

But the above choices clearly still affirm the gender binary. To avoid this, try pluralizing the noun to which the pronoun refers. Instead of “If a student studies hard, s/he will succeed,” write,

*Students* who study hard will succeed

Or opt for the gender-neutral, third-person singular “they,”

If a student wants to succeed, *they* must study.

Whichever strategy you choose, be consistent throughout your paper.

**Avoid gender-specific vocabulary when possible:** Words like “mankind” or “freshman” carry implications. Try inclusionary alternatives like “humanity” or “first-year.”

**Avoid stereotypical gendered characteristics:** It is important not to imply in your writing certain stereotypes associated with gender, for instance, that women are more passive and men more active. In addition to being discriminatory, this writing supports the gender binary and excludes gender-nonconforming people.

**Avoid misgendering:** Always use a person’s preferred pronouns, whether they ascribe to the gender binary (“he/him” or “she/her”) or choose to identify by neutral or nonbinary pronouns such as “they/them,” “ze/zir,” or “hir.” Intentionally misgendering or misnaming trans, intersex, or gender-nonconforming persons constitutes harassment.

Adapted from [NCTE’s Statement on Gender and Language](https://ncte.org/statement/genderfairuseoflang/).