

10. Pronoun Agreement

We replace specific nouns with pronouns to avoid repetition. Without pronouns, some of our sentences might look like this:

When Sara had lunch with Roger, Roger told Sara about Roger's geology class and where Roger's geology class was going on Roger's geology class' field trip.

Using pronouns, we make the sentence less wordy but maintain its clarity:

When Sara had lunch with Roger he told her about his geology class and where it was going on its field trip.

Sometimes when we use a pronoun, we forget to look back and see if the noun that we are referring to is singular or plural. As a subject must agree with its verb, a pronoun must agree in number with the noun it refers to.

Exercise 1

Change the following sentences so that the pronouns agree.

Example: **Incorrect:** Last week, I forgot to water my plants, so it wilted.
 Correct: Last week, I forgot to water my plants, so **they** wilted.

The pronoun *it* refers to *plants*, but since *plants* is plural, the pronoun needs to be *they*.

1. Many people have 9 to 5 jobs and work very hard at it.
2. I enjoy playing many sports, but I also like watching it on television.
3. My cats are happy when my neighbor feeds it leftovers.
4. Each of my sisters has their own car.
5. My problems with my boss started off small, but later it evolved into something

Pronouns: a special problem

English does not have a gender-free singular pronoun referring to people, so writers used to write sentences like this one:

When a photographer shoots, he must try to make his subject appear natural.

But now many people feel that the automatic use of *he* excludes women, that the sentence above, for example, might suggest that all photographers are male. So now we use other options to make our pronouns agree. We can include both sexes:

When a photographer shoots, he or she must try to make his or her subject appear natural.

But many readers also find this method wordy. One other option, when it makes sense in the context of our writing, is to make the pronoun and the noun it refers to plural:

When photographers shoot, they must try to make their subjects appear natural.

Exercise Two

Correct the following pronoun errors.

Example: When a person takes too many classes, they fall behind in their assignments.

Since *a person* is singular, but *they is* plural, the pronoun does not agree with the noun it refers to. To fix this, try either one of these choices:

Correct (option one): When **a person** takes too many classes, **he or she** often falls behind in **his or her** assignments.

Correct (option two): When **people** take too many classes, **they** often fall behind in **their** assignments.

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1. If a person is going to commit crimes, they should be prepared to face the consequences.
 2. Even though the average student tries to use their time wisely, they often fall prey to the many distractions of college life.
 3. Someone called late last night, but they hung up when I answered the phone.
 4. When a person goes to the supermarket, they should bring a list.

Shift in Person

Pronouns can be divided into three groups:

- 1) The first person: I/me we/us
- 2) The second person: you
- 3) The third person: she/her he/him one they/them

Problems occur when you switch from one group to the other group mid-sentence:

incorrect: When one is tired and under stress, you can have difficulty concentrating.

Since *one* and you don't refer to the same "person," the reader of the sentence can become confused about who it is the writer is referring to. The sentence can be corrected in any of the following ways:

When you are tired and under stress, you can have difficulty concentrating.

When one is tired and under stress, she or he can have difficulty concentrating.

When people are tired and under stress, they can have difficulty concentrating.

Exercise 3

Correct the following sentences so that pronouns agree. See the sentences above for possible solutions.

1. When one is very young, you often don't understand the pressures that parents face.
2. I liked the movie because it kept you on the edge of your seat.
3. Professor Clark told us that we don't have to answer the last essay question unless you want to skip one of the first four.
4. Either one can seek learning experiences or they can live for their possessions.
5. When you go shopping, one should have a specific list.