Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Explanation:

A pronoun is a word which replaces a noun (or in some cases another pronoun). The noun or pronoun replaced is referred to as the antecedent of the pronoun. In the sentence,

William went to a tailoring shop where he ordered a new suit for himself.

The noun William is the antecedent of the pronouns he and himself. This handout concerns itself with clarifying the grammatical rule which says that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in (1) person, (2) gender, and (3) number.

(1) Person may be first, second or third.

First person personal pronouns designate the person speaking or writing: I, me, my, mine, myself; we, us, our, ours, ourselves.

Second person personal pronouns designate the person spoken to: you, your, yours, yourself; yourselves

Third person personal pronouns designate the person, place, animal, or thing spoken about: he, him, his, himself; she, her, hers, herself; it, its, itself; they, them, their, theirs, themselves. Also categorized as third person are the relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, which, that) and the indefinite pronouns.

(2) Gender may be masculine (he, etc.), feminine (she, etc.), common or neuter (it, etc.). Only the third person singular personal pronouns have distinct gender forms:

Examples:

Mother removed her glasses. (feminine singular)

Father sat down in his chair. (masculine, singular)

The dog chased its tail. (common, singular)

Mother, father, and the dog took their daily walk. (all inclusive plural)
(3) **Number** may be either singular (one person or thing) or plural (more than one person or thing). If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun which refers to it must be singular; if the antecedent is plural, the pronoun which replaces it must also be plural.

Examples:

The **boy** reached for **his** plate. (Antecedent = **boy**; singular pronoun = **his**)

The **girls** reached for **their** plates. (Antecedent = **girls**; plural pronoun = **their**)

Since the correct choice of pronoun depends upon a clear determination of the person, gender, and number of the antecedent of that pronoun, the writer or speaker must be aware of certain grammatical rules regarding the antecedent.

1. **Intervening Phrases and Clauses**

   The antecedent must be distinguished from any phrase or clause which comes between it and the pronoun (s) which refers to it. Determine the correct pronouns in the examples which follow.

   Examples:

   Sally, along with her three sisters, achieved (her, their) educational goal. (Since the antecedent of the pronoun is Sally, **her** is the correct choice)

   Man, who is supposedly the most intelligent of the primates, may soon destroy (himself, themselves) and (his, their) world. (The antecedent of the pronouns is **man**, so the correct pronouns are **himself** and **his**.)

2. **Indefinite Pronouns**

   **Indefinite pronouns** are those which do not stand for any particular person or thing. Indefinite pronouns which appear as antecedents fall into three different groups:

   A. Those in the first group are always singular, so any pronouns which refer to them must also be singular: anybody, anyone, anything, another, each, one, other, either, neither, everybody, everyone, everything, nobody, no one, nothing, somebody, someone, something.

   Examples:

   **Anybody** can learn to balance his checkbook.

   **One** should always keep her promises.

   **Neither** of the men wanted his portrait painted.
No one ever stopped her car to assist the motorist.

Everything will be handled at its appropriate time.

Somebody will offer his help.

B. A second group of indefinite pronouns are always plural, so any pronouns which refer to them must also be plural:

    both, few, others, several

Examples:

    Both of the visitors wished they had not come.
    Several of the speakers repeated themselves.
    Others have made sacrifices for their country.

C. The third group consists of those indefinite pronouns which are sometimes singular, and sometimes plural. Their number is determined by the context and the intended meaning of the individual sentence. Included here are:

    all, any, many, most, none, some

Examples:

    All were rescued after their boat capsized. (plural)
    Any of the players may hurt themselves. (plural)
    Many of the customers did not pay their bills on time. (plural)
    Many a woman wishes she had chosen a different mate. (singular)
    Most of the snow melted as it hit the pavement. (singular)
    None of the students were able to finish their essays. (plural)
    None of the material is suitable for its purpose. (singular)
    Some of the mustard its left on my tie. (singular)

In most cases the gender of these indefinite pronouns is not distinctly masculine or feminine; consequently, the writer or speaker frequently makes the mistake of using the all-inclusive plural (they) rather than specific masculine “he” or feminine “she” to refer to the singular, unspecific pronouns. Traditional usage decrees that the masculine he be used to refer to
the indefinite singular pronouns (as well as to non-specific nouns, such as “person”, “student” or “employees”) unless the feminine gender is clearly indicated.

Examples:

Somebody should lend you his car. (not their car)

Someone left her purse on the desk. (clearly feminine)

If a person wants to be a success, he (not they) must be willing to work hard.

Current usage also allows for the sometimes awkward “he or she” combination.

Example:

Everyone hopes that he or she will pass the course.

This problem with agreement may be avoided by simply revising the sentence.

Example:

Everyone hopes to pass the course.

If people want to succeed, they must be willing to work hard.

Another common error occurs when the writer or speaker fails to recognize that all of the indefinite pronouns are in the third person and that all pronouns which refer to them must also be third person.

Example:

If anyone wishes to leave, you may go. (“you” is incorrect in this sentence because it is a second person pronoun. The correct choice is the third person pronoun “he” or the “he or she” combination)

Example Corrected:

If anyone wishes to leave, he (he or she) may go.

3. Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, which, that) are connectives; they join a dependent clause to a noun or pronoun in another part of the sentence. That noun or pronoun determines the number and gender of the relative pronoun of any other pronouns which refer to it.
Examples:

Jake is one of those independent men who want to live by themselves. (the relative pronoun “who” and the personal pronoun “themselves” agree with the antecedent “men” which is the third person, masculine, plural.)

Jane is the only one of the graduating women who wants to open her own store. (The relative pronoun “who” and the personal pronoun “her” agrees with the antecedent “one” referring to Jane, which is third person, feminine, singular.)

The house which Jack built has its own unique style. (Antecedent “house”, third person, neuter, singular)

The student that works hard will achieve his or her goal. (Antecedent “student”, third person, masculine or feminine, singular)

The cat whose coat is dirty will wash itself. (Antecedent “cat”, third person, common, singular)

The candidate whom everyone admires is honest in his financial dealings. (Antecedent “candidate”, third person, masculine or feminine, singular)

As these examples illustrate, the relative pronouns “who” and “whom” are used to refer to people, “which” is used to refer to places or things, and “that” and “whose” are used to refer to people, places or things.

4. Collective Nouns

Collective nouns name a collection of people under one heading: flock, jury, congregation, group, team, class, family, society, faculty, legislature, department, committee, staff, crew, club.

Such nouns (and the pronouns which refer to them) are considered singular when the specified group acts as a single unit and plural when the individual members of the group appear to act separately.

Examples in which the group acts as a single unit:

The committee has defined its goals.

The orchestra will give its final concert on March 15.

Examples in which the group acts as separate individuals:

As the ambulance sped away, the crowd broke up and shuffled back to their cars.
The legislature voted themselves raises.

5. Compound Antecedents

A. An antecedent which consists of two or more nouns or pronouns joined by “and” is plural, so any pronoun which refers to the compound antecedent must also be plural.

Examples:

He and I left our coats in the hall.

Helen and Beth prided themselves on their honesty.

Students, faculty, and administrators must agree on their educational goals.

B. One exception to this rule occurs when “each” or “every” precedes the singular words joined by “and”. The antecedent is then considered singular, so any pronoun which refers to it is also singular.

Examples:

Every Senator and every congressman should do his utmost to reduce the budget deficit.

Each man and woman controls his or her own destiny.

C. A second exception to the compound rule occurs when the nouns joined by “and” refer to one person or thing.

Example:

The household’s chief cook and bottle washer accepts her role cheerfully. (The chief cook and bottle washer is one person.)

6. Correlative Connections

When the antecedent is two nouns or pronouns joined by one of the correlative connectors (either, or, neither, nor, not, but, not only, but also, etc.), the pronouns which refers to it agrees with that part of the antecedent which is closest to the pronoun.

Examples:

Neither the commander nor his soldiers wanted to expose themselves to danger. (“Themselves” agrees with soldiers, the closest part of the antecedent.

Either the actors or the actress must change her attitude (“Her” agrees with actress, the closest part of the antecedent.)
Not the students but the instructor forgot his notes. (“His” agrees with instructor, the closest part of the antecedent.)

Not only father but also the children forgot their boots. (“Their” agrees with children, the closest part of the antecedent.)

7. Titles and Names

The title of a work or of a production, the name of a country, business, or company, even when plural in form, is considered singular, so any pronoun which refers to it must also be singular.

Examples:

American Motors is re-negotiating the contract with its employees.

When it premiered in 1938, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was an instant success.

8. Amounts

Words which state an amount of time, money, or weight are usually singular, so any pronouns which refer to them must also be singular.

Examples:

Forty-eight hours of sleeplessness has finally taken its toll.

Because twenty gallons of gasoline is very expensive nowadays, it would be a thoughtful gift for a driver.

9. Plural Form Nouns

Certain words which are plural in form have a singular meaning, so any pronoun which refers to them must also be singular: economics, civics, mathematics, physics, news, measles, mumps, ethics, politics, checkers, molasses.

Examples:

Physics can be difficult because it makes use of complicated mathematical formulas.

Because it is high in calories, molasses must be used sparingly in the diet.

Certain other words in this group are always plural, and therefore any pronouns which refer to them must also be plural: trousers, scissors, jeans, eyeglasses, thanks, riches, means.
Examples:

These scissors are so dull that I cannot cut with them.

Riches are not an end in themselves.

Exercise: In the sentences which follow, underline the correct form of the pronoun, making certain that the pronoun agrees in person, gender, and number with its antecedent.

1. No one knows what (he, they) can do until a time of trial.

2. Uncle Buck carved a model of two seagulls and then gave (it, them) to me as a keepsake.

3. In 1984, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics kept (its, their) athletes from competing in the Los Angeles Olympics.

4. Not only the Carolinas but also Virginia is noted for (its, their) beautiful beaches.

5. The children and their grandfather like to stroll on the beach after having (his, their) lunch.

6. The child wanted to offer her thanks, but she did not know how to express (it, them).

7. The Irish setter was one of the dogs (who, which) behaved (itself, himself, themselves) throughout the entire show.

8. Every soldier, sailor, and marine must be prepared to defend (his, their) country.

9. If Paul could gain (it, them) twenty pounds would put him in the heavyweight class.

10. The company announced that (its, their) new cars would be guaranteed against rust for five years.
Answers

1. he
2. it
3. its
4. its
5. their
6. them
7. which, themselves
8. his
9. it
10. its