

Pronouns

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources

What are pronouns?

Definition

Pronouns take the place of nouns. They prevent writers from repeating nouns. They also substitute for nouns when the writer is not sure of the nouns' meanings.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/pronoun_case.html

Definition

Nouns refer to people, places, ideas, or things. Nouns function as subjects or objects in sentences.

<https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/nouns>

There are:

Subject Pronouns

- | | | |
|-------|-------|--------|
| ✓ I | ✓ He | ✓ It |
| ✓ You | ✓ She | ✓ We |
| | | ✓ They |

Object Pronouns

- | | | |
|-------|-------|--------|
| ✓ Me | ✓ Him | ✓ It |
| ✓ You | ✓ Her | ✓ Us |
| | | ✓ Them |

Possessive Adjectives

- | | | |
|--------|-------|---------|
| ✓ Me | ✓ Him | ✓ Its |
| ✓ Your | ✓ Her | ✓ Our |
| | | ✓ Their |

Possessive Pronouns

- | | | |
|---------|--------|----------|
| ✓ Mine | ✓ His | ✓ Its |
| ✓ Yours | ✓ Hers | ✓ Ours |
| | | ✓ Theirs |

Three Pronoun Cases

Reminder

A pronoun's function depends on its case. A **case** is the pronoun's form which is determined by its function in a sentence.

<http://www.tcc.edu/uploads/pdf/writing-center-handouts/grammar-pronoun-case-guidelines.pdf>

1. Subjective case

Pronouns are subjects.

- **I** own a red car.
- **You** own a red car.
- **He** owns a red car.

2. Objective case

Pronouns are objects.

- Qi gave **me** a red car.
- Qi gave **you** a red car.
- Qi gave **him** a red car.

3. Possessive case

Pronouns express ownership.

- Ian likes **my** red car.
- Ian likes **your** red car.
- Ian likes **his** red car.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive
I	Me	My
You	You	You
He	Him	His
She	Her	Her
It	It	Its
We	Us	Our
They	Them	Their
Who	Whom	Whose
Whoever	Whomever	Whose ever

Pronoun Cases with Compound Constructions

Reminder

In a **compound construction**, the conjunction “and” connects a pronoun to a noun or another pronoun.

The **subject** of a sentence names who or what the sentence is about. e.g., *He opened the door*— *He* is the subject.

<http://guidetogrammar.org/grammar/subjects.htm>

Use the subjective case with pronouns in compound constructions that serves as the subject of a sentence. The subject completes the action in a sentence.

Examples:

- ✓ **They and Jennifer** shared new study techniques, learning the effects of note taking.
- ✓ **Some friends and I** are researching modern art.

Reminder

The object in a sentence is defined as the entity that is acted upon by the subject. e.g., *Kai studies math*— *Kai* is the subject and *math* is the object.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/about-words-clauses-and-sentences/objects>

Use the objective case with pronouns in compound constructions that serves as the object of the sentence. The object is acted upon.

Examples:

- ✓ Allan learned to play the guitar from **his brother and them**.
- ✓ Pop music does not impress **my friends and me**.

Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase describes the relationship between a noun or a pronoun and another word in a sentence. Prepositional phrases include words like *to*, *by*, *between*, *under*, and *on*. Use the objective case with pronouns in prepositional phrases.

- ✓ The used clothing was donated **to my friend and them**.
- ✓ The importance of the word “immediately” was misunderstood **by my friends and me**.
- ✓ The friendship **between the baker and her** was sincere.

Appositives

An appositive is a noun or a noun phrase that gives another name for the noun. Pronouns in appositives must match the case of the word to which they refer.

- ✓ Clark’s pitching style was similar to the **Major League pitchers, (Randy Johnson and them)**, he met in Seattle in the 1990s.
[The appositive refers to “Major League pitchers” which is the object.]
- ✓ The **small class, (you and me)**, is studying English grammar.
[The appositive refers to “class” which is the subject.]

Reminder

An **object** in a sentence is defined as the entity that is acted upon by the **subject**. e.g., He opened the door—The *door* is the object.

Reminder

The **subject** of a sentence names who or what the sentence is about. e.g., *He opened the door*—*He* is the subject.

<http://guidetogrammar.org/grammar/subjects.htm>

Two Rules of Pronoun References

Every pronoun must:

1. have a clear antecedent
2. agree with its antecedent

An antecedent is the word which the pronoun refers to. When a pronoun agrees with its antecedent, it shares the same tense.

Six Common Pronoun Reference Errors

1. When a pronoun refers to more than one antecedent

In this example, we cannot tell if “he” is referring to Daniel or Mohammad.

- ✗ Daniel told Mohammad that **he** was going to prepare the project on Tuesday.

We can rephrase the sentence so that it is clear that the pronoun only refers to Mohammad.

- ✓ Daniel told Mohammad, “**you** should prepare the project on Tuesday.”

2. When “this,” “that,” or “which” refers to a general idea rather than a specific preceding word

In this example, “which” is referring to “the literature,” but this is not true.

- ✗ The students could not understand the literature, **which** annoyed them very much.

Adjusting the sentence ensures that the reader knows that “which” refers to “a fact” that “the students could not understand the literature.”

- ✓ The students could not understand the literature, **a fact which** annoyed them very much.

3. When a pronoun is used to postpone a subject

This sentence is confusing because we do not know what “it” refers to. This is a problem if the author has never introduced the subject before.

- ✗ **It** said in *The New York Times* that the real estate in Manhattan is among the most expensive in the world.

By telling the reader what “it” is, the author can use a pronoun in future sentences to refer to James Black’s writing in *The New York Times*.

- ✓ **The columnist, James Black**, writing in *The New York Times* newspaper, indicated that the real estate in Manhattan was among the most expensive in the world.

4. When “they” or “it” is used to refer to something or someone unclearly

A sentence needs to specify its subject. Otherwise, readers cannot understand the pronoun reference.

- ✗ At the hospital, **they** told Bob that his wife had given birth to twin girls.
- ✓ At the hospital, **the doctors** told Bob that his wife had given birth to twin girls.

5. When the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent in number, gender, or person

The following sentence is incorrect because “tourist” is singular but “they” is plural.

- ✗ **Any tourist**, if **they** are interested, can visit the Bradley Museum in Mississauga.

You can fix the sentence by changing the pronoun “they” to a plural subject, “tourists.”

- ✓ **Tourists**, if **they** are interested, can visit the Bradley Museum in Mississauga.

In the following example, the “University Council” is a genderless singular subject. The matching possessive pronoun is “its.”

- ✗ The University Council will not make a decision about a tuition increase until **their** March meeting.
- ✓ The University Council will not make a decision about a tuition increase until **its** March meeting.

6. When a noun or a pronoun does not have an antecedent

In the following example we cannot tell whom “he” refers to. “James Black’s article” is a genderless singular subject, so it cannot be “he.”

- ✗ In James Black’s article, **he** criticized the property developers, including one company in particular: Southside Developers.

You can fix the sentence by specifying that James Black is making the criticisms.

- ✓ In **his** article, **James Black** criticized the property developers, including one company in particular: Southside Developers.

Practice Exercises:

Write down the pronoun or pronouns in the following sentences, and circle the correct type: subjective, objective, or possessive.

1. He enjoys collecting stickers.

What is the pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

2. George visited her in the shop.

What is the pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

3. He cleaned the carpet in the hallway

What is the pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

4. The birds are sitting on our tree near the kitchen window.

What is the pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

5. Emily sometimes ignores him.

What is the pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

6. Why doesn't she remind him of his password?

What is the first pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

What is the second pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

What is the third pronoun?

What is its type? (circle one)

Subject form

Object form

Possessive

7. Circle the correct sentence from the pairs below:

- A) Amateur sports players should drink water because **they** do not need all the sugar contained in energy drinks.
- B) Amateur sports players should drink water because **he** does not need all the sugar contained in energy drinks.

8. Circle the correct sentence from the pairs below:

- A) The teachers explained to the students that **all** had to attend the school baseball game.
- B) The teachers explained to the students, "**You** must all attend the school baseball game."

9. Circle the correct sentence from the pairs below:

- A) During the walking tour, **he** explained to the hikers that the mountain path could be slippery.
- B) During the walking tour, **the guide** explained to the hikers that the mountain path could be slippery.

10. Circle the correct sentence from the pairs below:

- A) The bus driver handed out free drinks because of the traffic delay, a gift **which** calmed the passengers.
- B) The bus driver handed out free drinks because of the traffic delay, **which** calmed the passengers.

Answers

1. He; Subject
2. her; Object
3. He; Subject
4. our; Possessive
5. him; Object
6. she; Subject; him; Object; his; Possessive
7. A (B has a singular male pronoun)
8. B (A is missing the plural pronoun “they”)
9. B (A does not have enough information to identify the pronoun “he”)
10. B (A misidentifies the traffic delay as a gift)

More resources for pronouns

Pronouns – Writing Centre, University of Maryland

<https://www.umaryland.edu/media/umb/oaa/campus-life/writing-center/documents/Pronouns.pdf>

Pronouns – Vincennes University

<https://my.vinu.edu/web/writing-center/pronouns>

Pronoun case – Purdue University Online Writing Lab

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/pronoun_case.html

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops:
<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an Instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>