

# Pronoun Antecedent Agreement

## WHAT IS A PRONOUN?

A *pronoun* is a word that refers to or takes the place of a noun.

## WHAT IS AN ANTECEDENT?

The noun being referred to by the pronoun is called the *antecedent*. The identity of the pronoun is made clear by the antecedent.

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent in **person**, **gender**, and **number**.

## Person

**Incorrect:** If a student wants to graduate on time, ***you*** need to plan accordingly.  
(This is incorrect because the second-person pronoun “you” does not agree with the third-person antecedent “student.”)

**Correct:** If a student wants to graduate on time, ***he or she*** needs to plan accordingly.  
If you want to graduate on time, ***you*** need to plan accordingly.

## Gender

**Incorrect:** If a student wants to make an appointment, ***he*** needs to sign up in the main office.  
(This is incorrect because you don’t know if the student is male or female.)

**Correct:** If a student wants to make an appointment, ***he or she*** needs to sign up in the main office.

If the students want to make an appointment, ***they*** need to sign up in the main office.

**Incorrect:** If the professor wants to cancel class, ***she*** may do so.  
(This is incorrect because you don’t know if the professor is male or female.)

**Correct:** If the professor wants to cancel class, ***he or she*** may do so.

If the professors want to cancel class, ***they*** may do so.

# Number

Incorrect: If the town wants to raise money, **they** need to start fundraising.  
(This is incorrect because the plural pronoun “they” does not agree with the singular antecedent “town.”)

Correct: If the town wants to raise money, **it** needs to start fundraising.

If the townspeople want to raise money, **they** need to start fundraising.

Incorrect: If the boys were smart, **he** would stay away from the building.  
(This is incorrect because the singular pronoun “he” does not agree with the plural antecedent “boys.”)

Correct: If the boys were smart, **they** would stay away from the building.

If the boy was smart, **he** would stay away from the building.

# Indefinite Pronoun Agreement

- Singular indefinite pronouns must always agree with their pronoun referents (pronouns which refer back to the indefinite pronouns). The following is a list of singular indefinite pronouns: **each, either, neither, one, no one, nobody, nothing, anyone, anybody, anything, someone, somebody, something, everyone, everybody, everything**

Incorrect: Each of the instructors assigns different assignments to **their** classes.  
(This is incorrect because the singular indefinite pronoun “each” does not agree with the plural pronoun referent “their.”)

Correct: Each of the instructors assigns different assignments to **his** or **her** classes.  
(This is correct because the singular indefinite pronoun “each” agrees with the singular pronoun referents “his” or “her.”)

- Plural indefinite pronouns must always agree with their pronoun referents. The following is a list of plural indefinite pronouns: **both, few, many, several**

Incorrect: Many of my friends enjoy spending **his** or **her** summer days on the beach.  
(This is incorrect because the plural indefinite pronoun “many” does not agree with the singular pronoun referents “his” or “her.”)

Correct: Many of my friends enjoy spending **their** summer days on the beach.  
(This is correct because the plural indefinite pronoun “many” agrees with the plural pronoun referent “their.”)

# More Indefinite Pronoun Agreement

- Indefinite pronouns must always agree with their referent pronouns in number; however, there are some special circumstances in which an indefinite pronoun may be considered singular or plural. These indefinite pronouns (*some, any, none, all, most*) are always modified by a prepositional phrase.

⇒ If the object of the prepositional phrase which follows the indefinite pronoun cannot be counted, then the indefinite pronoun is singular and takes a singular referent pronoun.

Incorrect: Some of the water has already spilled out of *their* container.  
(The object of the preposition “water” cannot be counted; therefore, the indefinite pronoun “some” is singular and must take a singular pronoun referent. This sentence is incorrect because the pronoun referent “their” is plural and does not agree.)

Correct: Some of the water has already spilled out of *its* container.  
(This sentence is correct because the pronoun referent “its” is singular and agrees.)

⇒ If the object of the prepositional phrase which follows the indefinite pronoun can be counted, then the indefinite pronoun is plural and takes a plural referent pronoun.

Incorrect: None of the girls wanted to get *her* hair cut.  
(The object of the preposition “girls” can be counted; therefore, the indefinite pronoun “none” is plural and must take a plural pronoun referent. This sentence is incorrect because the pronoun referent “her” is singular and does not agree.)

Correct: None of the girls wanted to get *their* hair cut.  
(This sentence is correct because the pronoun referent “their” is plural and agrees.)