



Lesson 17: Pronouns

Erin's little brother Eric has a lot of energy. Him's favorite activity is banging on pots with a wooden spoon. Erin says that the noise gives Erin's mother a headache. Every week, Erin and Erin's mother take Eric to the park. Erin and Erin's mother take turns pushing Eric on the tire swing. Eric also likes to feed him's leftover toast to the ducks.

This paragraph sort of makes sense, but *Erin* and *Eric* appear too often, and the few pronouns that have been used are incorrect. (*Him's* is NOT a word!)

Pronouns are words that replace nouns. They can keep your writing from being too repetitive and they can save space. But when a pronoun is misused, you can confuse your readers and give inaccurate information. In this lesson, you'll review the skills that will help you avoid the most common pronoun-related errors.



TIP 1: Use pronouns to take the place of nouns (people, places, and things).

An essay without pronouns can be awkward and unnatural to read. In the paragraph above, the writer referred to Erin and Eric by name over and over again. You probably got tired of reading their names so many times! Using pronouns like *he*, *she*, *us*, *we*, or *them* helps writers to avoid repeating the same names.



TIP 2: A pronoun must agree in gender and in number with the noun it represents.

The **gender** of a noun means whether that noun refers to a male or a female. *Erin* is female, so we need a female pronoun. Erin is only one person, so we need a singular pronoun. Here are some singular and plural **personal pronouns**:

Singular	Plural
I, me, my, mine	we, us, our, ours
you, your, yours	you, your, yours
he, him, his (masculine) she, her, hers (feminine)	they, them, their, theirs
it, its	

Read these lines again:

Every week, Erin and Erin's mother take Eric to the park. Erin and Erin's mother take turns pushing Eric on the tire swing.

In the second sentence, the plural pronoun *they* can replace the words *Erin and Erin's mother*. Look at how the second sentence is different when we use the plural pronoun:

They take turns pushing Eric on the tire swing.

Here, the pronoun agrees in number because *they* refers to more than one person. Gender does not matter in this case because *they* can be used to talk about two or more girls, boys, or even a group that includes both girls and boys



TIP 3: Pay attention to how the pronoun is being used.

Pronoun case depends on how the pronoun will be used in the sentence.

If you chose one feminine singular pronoun (such as *she*) and plugged it in every time you saw *Erin*, what would happen?

She's little brother, Eric, has a lot of energy. Him's favorite activity is banging on pots with a wooden spoon. She says that the noise gives she's mother a headache. Every week, she and she's mother take Eric to the park. She and she's mother take turns pushing Eric on the tire swing. Eric also likes to feed him's leftover toast to the ducks.

Which pronoun you use depends on how it is used in a sentence. The following tips will help you understand which pronoun to use in a variety of situations.



TIP 4: Some pronouns take the place of subjects.

Some pronouns serve as the subjects of sentences. They stand in for the person, place, thing, or idea that the writer is referring to. These are known as **subjective case** pronouns (also called **nominative case** pronouns). Personal pronouns in the subjective or nominative case include *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, and *they*.

I ran. He jumped. She went to school. We are going to the park. They left earlier.

**TIP 5: Some pronouns take the place of objects.**

Personal pronouns can be used as the direct object of a verb, an indirect object, or the object of a preposition in a sentence. These pronouns are known as **objective case** pronouns. Personal pronouns used in the objective case include *me, him, her, us, and them*.

Jorge saw Kristen at the movie theater.

Jorge saw her at the movie theater.

Kristen bought Jorge a bag of popcorn.

Kristen bought him a bag of popcorn.

**TIP 6: Use possessive pronouns to replace possessive nouns.**

Some pronouns take the place of possessive nouns in a sentence. They're called **possessive pronouns**. Possessive pronouns include *my, mine, his, her, hers, our, ours, your, yours, their, and theirs*.

Kristen and Jorge's friends forgot to save them a seat.

Their friends forgot to save them a seat.

So, Henry and I gave up Henry's and my seats.

So, Henry and I gave up our seats.

**TIP 7: Indefinite pronouns are used to make a general reference to nouns.**

If a pronoun refers to a nonspecific (general) person, place, or thing, it is called **indefinite**. Some of the most common indefinite pronouns are shown here:

Indefinite Pronouns		
Singular	Plural	Both
another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, little, much, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something	both, few, many, others, several	all, any, more, most, none, some

Here are examples of indefinite pronouns at work. (Notice that the verb forms are different for singular and plural pronouns.)

Singular: Everyone is going to the Taco Hut for dinner.

Plural: Many are going to the Taco Hut for dinner.

Singular or Plural: All I want is to go to the Taco Hut for dinner.

(Here, *All* refers to the one thing the speaker wants, singular.)

Singular or Plural: All of the players on the team are going to the Taco Hut for dinner.

(Here, *All* refers to the players on the team, plural.)



TIP 8: Relative pronouns can be used to combine sentences or used in noun clauses.

A **relative pronoun** can refer to people (*who, whom*), things (*which, that*), or either (*whose*). Relative pronouns are useful when you want to combine sentences and make your writing flow more smoothly. Here are some examples:

OK Cristina studied the famous artist. He painted pictures of Venice.

BETTER Cristina studied the famous artist who painted pictures of Venice.

OK Jason showed us his new soccer jersey. He had purchased it at Wally's World of Sports.

BETTER Jason showed us his new soccer jersey, which he had purchased at Wally's World of Sports.

OK Only one choice in the school cafeteria sounded good. It was the spaghetti.

BETTER The only choice in the school cafeteria that sounded good was the spaghetti.

You can also add the suffix *-ever* to create *whichever, whoever, whomever*, and *whatever* for noun phrases like those underlined in the following sentences:

I'll go to whichever restaurant you choose.

Whoever made this mess needs to pick it up.

I'm sure you will get whatever you ask for.


TIP 9: Interrogative pronouns are found in questions.

Interrogative pronouns such as *who*, *whom*, *which*, *what*, and *whose* stand in for the answers to questions. Look at the following examples:

Who stole the cookies from the cookie jar?

Jessica stole the cookies from the cookie jar.

Which is the quickest route to the mall?

Oak Street is the quickest route to the mall.


TIP 10: Intensive pronouns are “selfish.”

Intensive pronouns reflect a noun or pronoun that is doing something to itself. Singular intensive pronouns end with the suffix *-self*. Here are a few examples:

myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself

Plural intensive pronouns end with the suffix *-selves*. Here are a few examples:

ourselves, yourselves, themselves

Intensive pronouns are always the object of a sentence, never the subject. Look at the following examples:

The cut on Jim’s arm healed itself.

The intensive pronoun *itself* reflects the cut.

Suzanne waited for her guests to be seated and then seated herself.

The intensive pronoun *herself* reflects *Suzanne*.

The painters painted themselves into the corner.

The intensive pronoun *themselves* reflects the *painters*.

Interrogative pronouns may take the place of subjects (**subjective**) or objects (**objective**). In the previous examples, the pronouns were subjective. Look at the following example:

Whom did they pick to compete in the gymnastics competition?

They picked Jeanine to compete in the gymnastics competition.

In this case, the interrogative pronoun *Whom* is objective because *Jeanine* is the object of the sentence.



TIP 11: Correct vague pronouns.

The word a pronoun refers to is called its **antecedent**. The connection between an antecedent and a pronoun should be clear to readers. Here are some common examples of vague pronouns:

Marvin saw his coach at the mall. He was buying a shirt.

The word *He* is vague in this sentence. Does it refer to Marvin or the coach? Readers should always be able to identify the antecedent in a sentence or paragraph. To correct this sentence, you'll need to identify who is buying a shirt.

When Marvin was buying a shirt at the mall, he saw his coach.

Marvin saw his coach buying a shirt at the mall.

Here is another example:

During orientation, they gave me the wrong schedule.

The word *they* is vague. Who, specifically, does it refer to? To correct this sentence, identify *they* or state what you really mean.

During orientation, the guidance counselor gave me the wrong schedule.

During orientation, I was given the wrong schedule.

Here is another example:

When she was twelve, Sylvia's team won the championship.

The pronoun *she* refers to *Sylvia*, but only *Sylvia's team* appears in the sentence—so *she* refers to *Sylvia's team*, which is incorrect. To correct this sentence, *she* needs to agree with the correct subject.

When she was twelve, Sylvia was on a championship winning team.

Here is another example:

At a local gym, they give members free water and use of the spa.

The pronoun *they* does not refer to a noun in the sentence. To correct it, identify the noun that *they* refers to.

At a local gym, the owners give members free water and use of the spa.