

Revising: Five Trouble Spots in Pronoun Agreement

Just about all native speakers (and most fluent non-native speakers) have good intuitions about correct grammar regarding simple pronoun-antecedent and subject-verb agreement rules; in other words, they know and observe the rules without knowing that they're doing it. However, some expressions present difficulties for all speakers, often because they're arbitrary but have nonetheless become enshrined in the standard language over the years. For these expressions, appealing to intuition doesn't always work, and often neither does appealing to form or meaning because these expressions are in fact so arbitrary. The expressions below usually present the greatest confusion in pronoun-antecedent agreement.

- Indefinite pronouns take a single pronoun, even though they may sometimes seem plural in meaning.

Examples of indefinite pronouns:

anybody	either	neither
somebody	anyone	everybody
nobody	someone	anything
everyone	none	something
each	everything	no one

Everybody who thinks that he or she is depressed should consult a professional.

- Generic nouns take singular pronouns.

Every novelist has his or her favorite characters.

A smart novelist nowadays should write his or her books for a multicultural market.

General note: To avoid the wordiness of *he or she* without affecting the meaning of a sentence, pluralizing antecedents and subsequent pronouns usually works, in this case:

Novelists have their favorite characters.

Smart novelists nowadays should write their books for a multicultural market.

- Collective nouns (nouns with a singular form referring to a group) take singular pronouns.

Examples of collective nouns:

jury	committee	audience
crowd	class	troupe

family team

The family moved back to its hometown.

To stress individual members of the group, use a plural pronoun.

After Jesse revealed her so-called news, the family scattered to their respective rooms.

- Compound expressions connected by *and* take a plural pronoun.

Freud and Jung quarreled and went their separate ways.

- Pronouns referring to compound expressions connected by *or*, *nor*, *either...or*, and *neither...nor* agree with the closest element.

Neither Chomsky nor his followers integrate sociolinguistics into their theories.
(*followers* is closer to the pronoun than *Chomsky*)

Tips: When one element is singular and the other plural, placing the plural element second makes a more idiomatic sentence.

When one element is male and the other is female, the sentence is almost always awkward. In these cases, revise the sentence using a different sentence structure.

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