PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

WHAT IS A PRONOUN?
A pronoun is a word that refers to or replaces a noun.

WHAT IS AN ANTECEDENT?
An antecedent is the noun being referred to by the pronoun. The identity of the pronoun is made obvious by the antecedent.

A pronoun must agree with the antecedent in person, gender, and number. In writing, you should not assume gender and should use a person’s self-identified pronoun. When a person’s self-identified pronoun is not known, the singular “they” should be used.

PERSON
- Incorrect: The student wanted to go to your dorm room after class.
  *This is incorrect because the pronoun “your” is in second-person while the antecedent “the student” is third-person.

- Correct: The student wanted to go to his dorm room after class.
  *You must change the pronoun and antecedent to the same point of view.

GENDER
- Incorrect: If a student wants to make an appointment, he must do so online.
  *This is incorrect because you do not know if the student is male or female.

- Correct: If a student wants to make an appointment, they must do so online.
  *You must change the pronoun to a gender-neutral one when the gender of the antecedent is unknown.
NUMBER

- **Incorrect:** The company is having a party to celebrate their grand opening.
  *This is incorrect because “the company” is not a plural noun, but the antecedent “their” is.
  “The company” is singular because it is one company even though there are many people working in the company.

- **Correct:** The company is having a party to celebrate its grand opening.
  *Use “its” to refer to singular antecedents such as the company, the business, the organization, the University, etc.

- **Incorrect:** If the boy wants to do well on the test, they would study.
  *This is incorrect because “the boy” is singular, but the pronoun “they” is plural.

- **Correct:** If the boy wants to do well on the test, he would study.
  *You must change the pronoun to a singular one.

- **Incorrect:** The dogs wanted to play fetch with her ball.
  *This is incorrect because “dogs” is plural and “her” is singular.

- **Correct:** The dogs wanted to play fetch with their ball.
  *You must change the pronoun to a plural one.

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:** Everybody has to create a ten minute presentation for her business class.
  *This is incorrect because the plural antecedent “everybody” does not agree with the singular pronoun “her.”
Correct: Everybody has to create a ten minute presentation for their business class.

*This is correct because the plural antecedent “everybody” agrees with the plural pronoun “their.”

Plural indefinite pronouns must always agree with their pronoun referents. The following are plural indefinite pronouns:

both, few, many, several

Incorrect: Many people enjoy taking her children on vacation in the summer.

*This is incorrect because “many” is a plural antecedent and “her” is singular.

Correct: Many people enjoy taking their children on vacation in the summer.

*This is correct because the plural antecedent now agrees with the plural pronoun “their.”

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 that follows the indefinite pronoun cannot be counted, then the indefinite pronoun is singular and takes a singular referent pronoun.

Incorrect: Most of the water in the bay does not move from their primary location.

*This is incorrect because “most of the water” is not countable, making it singular, but the antecedent “their” is plural.

Correct: Most of the water in the bay does not move from its primary location.

*This is correct because the singular antecedent now agrees with the singular pronoun “its”.

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100 International Drive | Baltimore, MD 21202