

Writing Module

Noun/Pronoun Agreement

Noun/pronoun agreement is when the pronoun agrees with the noun it refers to—in gender and number.

A *pronoun* refers to a noun that was mentioned earlier in the text. This noun is called the *antecedent*. For example:

The employee read the review on her performance.

Her is the pronoun and refers to the antecedent, *employee*.

Bob and Harry travel a lot for their jobs.

Their is the pronoun and refers to the antecedent, *Bob and Harry*.

The pronoun must agree with the noun it refers to—in gender and number. This is called **noun/pronoun agreement**.

You often can trust your ear when it comes to detecting pronoun errors. Read the example out loud, and see if you can determine whether or not it is incorrect because of the way it sounds.

The executive board hesitates to punish their own members for ethics violations.

Read the example again out loud:

The executive board hesitates to punish their own members for ethics violation.

To your ear, the use of *their* should have sounded awkward. *Executive board* is singular, so the pronoun should have been *its*. Read the following out loud.

The executive board hesitates to punish *its* own members for ethics violations.

This should sound better to your ear.

Noun/pronoun agreement sometimes results in two common types of errors.

Ask yourself the following question when you proofread your work: Is it completely clear to whom or what the pronoun is referring in the sentence?

Error 1: The pronoun reference to the antecedent is vague or ambiguous.

The first common error with noun/pronoun agreement occurs when the pronoun reference to the antecedent is vague or ambiguous. For example:

Although the motorcycle hit the tree, it was not damaged.

Is *it* referring to the motorcycle or the tree?

I don't think they should show violence on the TV.

Who are *they*?

If you put this sheet of instructions in your notebook, you can refer to it.

Is *it* referring to the sheet or the notebook?

When you proofread your writing, ask yourself: Is it completely clear to whom (or to what) the pronoun is referring?

Error 2: It is unclear whether the pronoun is singular or plural.

The second common error with noun/pronoun agreement occurs with pronoun number. Should you use the singular pronoun or the plural pronoun? For example:

The average male moviegoer expects to see at least one scene of violence per film, and they are seldom disappointed.

The pronoun *they* is referencing the *average male moviegoer*. *They* is plural and *moviegoer* is singular.

This results in an error in the pronoun number.

Another question to ask yourself when you proofread your work: Does the pronoun agree in number with the noun to which it is referring?

The correct sentence should read:

The average male moviegoer expects to see at least one scene of violence per film, and *he* is seldom disappointed.

Singular pronouns include:

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| ▪ <i>I, me</i> | ▪ <i>other</i> | ▪ <i>each</i> |
| ▪ <i>he, him</i> | ▪ <i>mine</i> | ▪ <i>everyone</i> |
| ▪ <i>she, her</i> | ▪ <i>yours</i> | ▪ <i>everybody</i> |
| ▪ <i>it</i> | ▪ <i>his, hers</i> | ▪ <i>nobody</i> |
| ▪ <i>each</i> | ▪ <i>this</i> | ▪ <i>no one</i> |
| ▪ <i>another</i> | ▪ <i>either</i> | ▪ <i>neither</i> |
| ▪ <i>one</i> | | |

Plural pronouns include:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| ▪ <i>we, us</i> | ▪ <i>those</i> |
| ▪ <i>they, them</i> | ▪ <i>these</i> |
| ▪ <i>both</i> | |

The following pronouns can be singular or plural, depending on the context in which they are used:

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| ▪ <i>some</i> | ▪ <i>who</i> |
| ▪ <i>none</i> | ▪ <i>which</i> |
| ▪ <i>ours</i> | ▪ <i>what</i> |
| ▪ <i>you</i> | ▪ <i>that</i> |

When you proofread you writing, ask yourself: Does the pronoun agree in number with the noun to which it refers?

To recap the two rules of noun/pronoun agreement.

Rule 1: The noun to which the pronoun refers is clear.

Rule 2: The number of the pronoun matches the number of the noun.

If you follow the basic rules provided when writing and proofreading your papers, you should have no problem with noun/pronoun agreement.

Return to the Graduate Success Prep Program available through the myFranklin Web site and do the exercises for this module.