PRONOUNS 1: PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

(Dirty Dozen Error 5: (p/a) Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Error)

A pronoun takes the place of a noun. An antecedent is the word, phrase, or clause to which a pronoun refers. In all of the following examples, the antecedent is in bold and the pronoun is italicized.

- The teacher forgot her book.

In the sentence above, her is the pronoun, and teacher is the antecedent.

Checking for Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

A pronoun and its antecedent must agree in ‘person’: first (I, we), second (you), or third (he, she, it, they). They also must agree in gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter) and number (singular or plural). Errors in person and gender are rare, so we won’t discuss them here. Most pronoun-antecedent agreement errors have to do with number.

If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun should be singular. If the antecedent is plural, the pronoun should be plural.

- Example 1—incorrect: The dogs tugged on its leash.
- Correction 1: The dogs tugged on their leashes.

Only in the second sentence does the pronoun (their) agree with the antecedent (dogs): both are plural.

Except for careless mistakes or typos, students rarely make this kind of error. In the next section, we’ll look at the pronoun-antecedent situations that cause most problems.

The Most Problematic Pronoun-Antecedent Situation

Most agreement problems arise with the singular indefinite nouns (person, student, individual, soldier, etc.) and indefinite pronouns (someone, each, anybody, neither). These words are “indefinite” because they do not definitely refer to males, nor do they definitely refer to females. Because they are singular, they should be followed by the singular pronouns "his or her," "his or hers," or "him or her," depending on context. However, people often (very often) mistakenly use plural pronouns such as they or their to refer to indefinite singular antecedents, like this:

- Example 2—incorrect: Everyone has their own locker.
- Example 3—incorrect: A person can padlock their locker.

“Everyone” is singular and therefore must have a singular pronoun. “Person” is also singular and should have a singular pronoun.

- Correction 2: Everyone has his or her own locker.
- Correction 3: A person can padlock his or her locker.

However, using “his or her,” “him or her,” and “he or she” can be awkward and repetitive. Therefore, we often resort to other strategies and revise our text in such a way as to avoid “his or her” and the like, yet still communicate our meaning and maintain correct grammar.
Strategy 1: Make the noun plural.

- Example 4—correct but awkward: A person can padlock his or her locker.
- Example 4a—correct and more graceful: People can padlock their lockers.

Strategy 2: Rewrite the sentence to omit the pronoun.

- Example 5—correct but awkward: Everyone is entitled to his or her private space.
- Example 5a—correct and more graceful: Everyone is entitled to a private space.

Some Other Problematic Pronoun-Antecedent Situations

1. When antecedents are joined by "or" or "nor," the pronoun should agree with the antecedent closer to it.

   - Example 6—correct but awkward: Neither the chicks nor their mother would ever leave her nest.
   
   This is grammatically correct but doesn't make very good sense. For a more natural-sounding sentence, place the plural part of a compound subject second.

   - Example 6a—better: Neither the mother nor her chicks would ever leave their nest.

2. Collective nouns are nouns that refer to groups (class, group, jury, etc.). They take singular or plural pronouns depending on whether they refer to the group acting together as one unit—in which case, we use the singular pronoun—or to the members of the group acting separately—when the plural pronoun is called for.

   - Example: The jury was unanimous in its verdict. (The jury is acting as a unit, so we treat "jury" as singular.)
   - Example: The jury disagreed in their assessment of the case. (The jury members are acting individually, so we treat "jury" as plural.)

   Note: To avoid awkward-sounding plural collective nouns, place “the members of” or a similar phrase before the collective noun.

   - Example: The members of the jury disagreed in their assessment of the case.
   - Example: The students in the class presented their research projects during the tenth week of the semester.

3. Some indefinite pronouns are always treated as plurals; others may be singular or plural depending how the pronoun is used. Four indefinite pronouns—both, few, many, several—are always plural and are referred to with plural pronouns.

   - Example: When young, few realize how much their affection means to the adults in their lives.
   - Example: Many distrust their elected officials.

   Other indefinite pronouns—all, any, more, most, none, some—may be singular or plural depending on the word to which they refer.

   - Example: All the money was counted when it changed hands. (“All” refers to “money,” which is singular.)
   - Example: Most of the geysers have their own personality. (“Most” refers to “geysers,” which is plural.)