PRONOUNS 2: VAGUE OR UNCLEAR PRONOUN REFERENCES
(Dirty Dozen Error 6: (pro) Vague or Unclear Pronoun Reference)

Remember that a pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun.

Unclear Pronoun Reference

An unclear pronoun reference occurs when it is not clear what noun a pronoun refers to. In the following examples, the pronoun is in italics, and the noun or nouns to which that pronoun might refer are in bold:

- Example 1—unclear: The teacher gave the student her notes. (Does the pronoun her refer to the noun teacher or the noun student?)
- Correction 1: The teacher gave the student some notes the teacher had made on unclear pronoun references. (We eliminate the pronoun and make it clear that the teacher authored the notes.)
- Correction 1a: The teacher gave her notes to a young man enrolled in her English Comp class. (We make it clear that the student is male, and thus the teacher is the female referred to by the pronoun her.)
- Correction 1b: Professor Robert Pynchon gave the student her notes. (We make it clear that the teacher is male, and thus the student is the female referred to by the pronoun her.) (Don’t try this with a first name like “Sidney” or “Lynn” or “Michael,” which can belong to either a man or a woman!)

Vague Pronoun Reference

A vague pronoun reference can occur in two situations:

1. A pronoun like it, this, that, or which refers to a concept or word that is only implied in the sentence rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

   - Example 1—vague: She gave the Red Cross all her money, and this is the reason that she declared bankruptcy. (Here, this refers to an implied concept that could be phrased something like “the fact that she gave the Red Cross all her money”; in other words, this concept does not appear in the sentence as a specific noun.)
   - Correction 1: Because she gave the Red Cross all her money, she had to declare bankruptcy. (We eliminate the vague pronoun and clarify the causal relationship between her giving away money and her declaring bankruptcy.)

   - Example 2—vague: Michelle is a shy person, but she keeps it hidden. (Here, it refers to “shyness,” and although the concept of shyness is implied in this sentence, the word “shyness” does not appear in it. Thus, the pronoun is referring to a noun that isn’t there.)
   - Correction 2: Michelle is a shy person, but she keeps her shyness hidden. (Again, the vague pronoun is eliminated.)
2. A pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase or to a possessive:

- Example 3—vague: In the average television drama, *it* presents a false picture of life. (Here, *it* refers to “drama,” and “drama” is the object of the prepositional phrase “in the average television drama” and therefore cannot serve as the antecedent noun for *it.*)
  - Correction 3: The average television drama presents a false picture of life. (The vague pronoun is eliminated.)

- Example 4—vague: In the directions, *they* said that the small box should be opened last. (Here, *they* refers to “directions,” but “directions” is the object of the prepositional phrase “in the directions” and therefore cannot provide an antecedent noun for the pronoun *they.*)
  - Correction 4: The directions say that the small box should be opened last. (Again, we eliminate the vague pronoun.)

- Example 5—vague: Othello’s jealousy brought *him* tragedy and death. (Here, *him* must refer to Othello. Although the concept that a person named Othello exists is implied in this sentence, the actual word “Othello” does not appear. “Othello’s” appears, but “Othello’s” is a possessive and is acting like an adjective, not a noun. Here’s another way to look at this construction: the phrase “Othello’s jealousy” is another way of saying “the jealousy of Othello,” so a noun turned into a possessive is very like a noun serving as the object of the preposition “of.” Neither one is available to be the antecedent noun of the pronoun.)
  - Correction 5: *His* indecision brought Hamlet tragedy and death. (Now the pronoun *his* has a clear noun, Hamlet, to serve as its antecedent, i.e., to refer to.)