



Dirty Dozen Workshop 4

**Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Errors & Vague or
Unclear Pronoun References**

PRESENTED BY THE WRITING CENTER

Part One:

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Errors

Which sentence is correct?

People trying to reduce their salt intake should avoid canned foods.

~ OR ~

Anyone trying to reduce their salt intake should avoid canned foods.

People trying to reduce their salt intake should avoid canned foods.

Anyone trying to reduce their salt intake should avoid canned foods.

INCORRECT

Why?

“**their**” – the pronoun in this sentence – is plural.

“**people**” – the antecedent to which the pronoun refers – is also plural.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Errors (p/a)

A pronoun replaces a noun.

An **antecedent** is the word, phrase, or clause to which a pronoun refers.

The **teacher** forgot her book.

Checking for Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Pronouns and antecedents must agree in:

- **Person:** first person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), or third person (*he, she, it, they*)
- **Gender:** masculine, feminine, or neuter
- **Number:** singular or plural

Fact:

Most pronoun-antecedent agreement errors result from **number disagreement.**



Rule of thumb: If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular. If the antecedent is plural, the pronoun must be plural.

Example:

The soldier ironed their uniform.

(p/a) error example:

✗ **The soldier ironed their uniform.**

Correct: The soldiers ironed
their uniforms.

Why? Only in the second sentence does the pronoun (*their*) agree with the antecedent (*soldiers*). (Both are plural.)

The Most Problematic (p/a) Situation

Most agreement problems arise with **singular indefinite nouns** (*person, student, individual, soldier, etc.*) and **indefinite pronouns** (*someone, each, anybody, neither*).



Rule of thumb: These words are "indefinite" because they do not definitely refer to males or females. Because they are singular, they should be followed by the singular pronouns "he or she," "his or her," "his or hers," or "him or her," depending on context.

Common (p/a) Mistakes

COMMON MISTAKE #1

People often use plural pronouns such as *they* or *their* to refer to indefinite singular antecedents, like this:

A person can do only what they can.

Everyone should always lock their car.

Common (p/a) Mistakes

COMMON MISTAKE #1

People often use plural pronouns such as *they* or *their* to refer to indefinite singular antecedents, like this:

- ✗ A person can do only what they can.
- ✗ Everyone should always lock their car.

This usage is common but incorrect. **Everyone** is singular and therefore should have a singular pronoun. **A person** is also singular and should have a singular pronoun.

Correct Use & Solutions



Everyone has his or her own car.
A person should always lock
his or her car.

Although correct, using *his or her, him or her, he or she* can become awkward and repetitive. Here are solutions:

1. Make the noun plural.

People should lock their cars.

2. Rewrite the sentence to omit the pronoun:

Everyone has a car.

COMMON MISTAKE #2

Antecedents Joined With “Or” or “Nor”



Rule of Thumb: When antecedents are joined by *or* or *nor*, the pronoun should agree with the antecedent closest to it. Example:

Neither the baseball players nor the coach would give up his hope for a win.

Psst! For a more natural-sounding sentence, place the plural part of a compound subject second. Example: Neither the coach nor the baseball players would give up their hope for a win.

COMMON MISTAKE #3

Collective Nouns & Their Pronouns

Collective nouns refer to groups, such as *class*, *herd*, and *jury*. They take singular or plural pronouns depending on whether they refer to the group acting together as one unit (singular) or to the members of the group acting separately (plural).

Examples:

The jury was unanimous in its verdict.

The jury disagreed in their assessments of the case.

COMMON MISTAKE #4

Indefinite Pronouns

Four indefinite pronouns—**both, few, many, several**—are always plural and are referred to with plural pronouns.

Example: Few realize how quickly their lives can change.

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

Examples: Most of the residents got their mortgages through the same bank.

Any player could have her best game of the season tonight.

Part Two:

Vague or Unclear Pronoun References

Vague or Unclear Pronoun Reference (pro)

An **ambiguous pronoun reference** occurs when the noun a pronoun refers to is unclear.



Example:

The coach handed the player
her cleats.

Recognizing Vague Pronoun References

A vague pronoun reference usually occurs in one of two situations:

1. When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.
2. When a pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase.

Let's take a deeper look at each of these situations...



situation

One

When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

Example 1:

She had been studying hard for weeks, and this is the reason she aced her final exam.

situation
One

When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

Example 1:

She had been studying hard for weeks, and this is the reason she aced her final exam.

Here, *this* refers to an implied concept that could be phrased something like “the fact that she had been studying hard for weeks” rather to a specific noun.

Better: **The fact that she had been studying hard for weeks explains why she aced her final exam.**

situation

One

When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

Example 2:

Kevin is a multi-millionaire, but he hides it well.

situation
One

When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

Example 2:

Kevin is a multi-millionaire, but he hides it well.

Here, *it* refers to Kevin's wealth, and although the concept of wealth is implied in this sentence, the word *wealth* does not appear in it. Thus, the pronoun is referring to a noun that isn't there. That's not good.

Better: Kevin is a multi-millionaire, but he keeps his wealth hidden well.

situation

One

When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

Example 3:

Cindi Knox's efforts brought her great success.

situation
One

When a pronoun like *it*, *this*, *that*, or *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun.

Example 3:

Cindi Knox's efforts brought her great success.

Here, *her* likely refers to Cindi Knox, but not necessarily. In this example, the words "Cindi Knox's" function as an adjective that describes the noun "efforts." Antecedents must be nouns; therefore, the pronoun "her" is referring to a noun that isn't there, making it vague. (*Cindi Knox* is a proper noun; *Cindi Knox's* is an adjective.)

Better: Her efforts brought Cindi Knox great success.

situation
Two

When a pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase.

Example 1:

In the average television drama, it presents a false picture of life.

situation
Two

When a pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase.

Example 1:

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.”

Better: **The average television drama presents a false picture of life.**

situation
Two

When a pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase.

Example 2:

In the diagram, it showed that Maine's primary export is lobster.

situation
Two

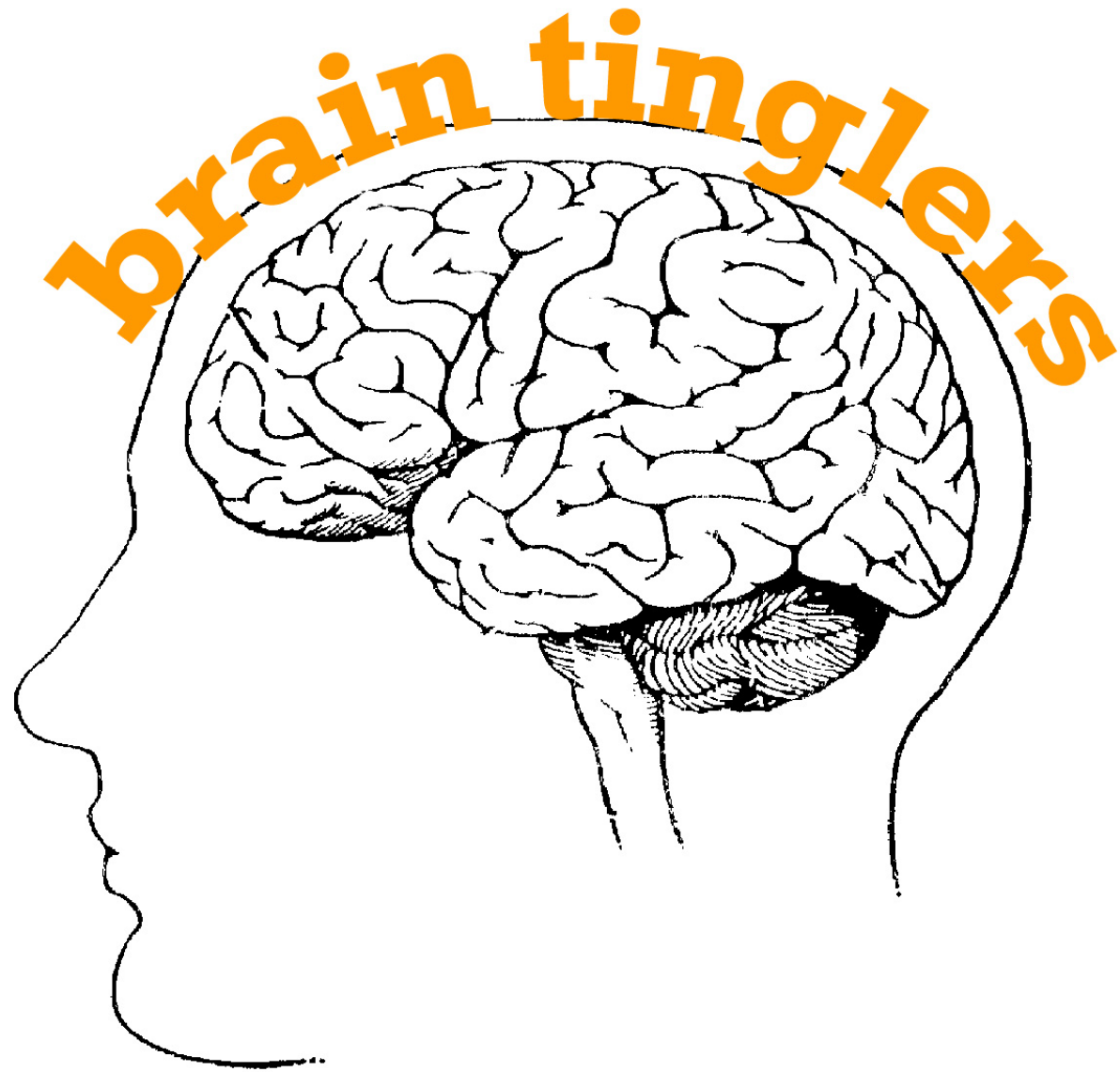
When a pronoun is used to refer to the object of a prepositional phrase.

Example 2:

In the diagram, it showed that Maine's primary export is lobster.

Here, *it* refers to *diagram*, and *diagram* is the object of the prepositional phrase “in the diagram.”

Better: The diagram showed that Maine's primary export is lobster.





In the following pairs, one sentence is correct, and the other sentence has a pronoun-antecedent agreement error.

A) At the women's golf tournament, one of the golfers broke her putter.

B) At the women's golf tournament, one of the golfers broke their putter.

A) At the women's golf tournament, one of the golfers broke her putter.

B) At the women's golf tournament, one of the golfers broke their putter.

INCORRECT

Sentence B is incorrect. *One* is singular. *Their* is plural. Because *one* refers to a female golfer, the correct pronoun is *her*.



In the following pairs, one sentence is correct, and the other sentence has a pronoun-antecedent agreement error.

- A) Either of the boys could have shared his snack with the hungry dog.
- B) Either of the boys could have shared their snack with the hungry dog.

A) Either of the boys could have shared his snack with the hungry dog.

B) Either of the boys could have shared their snack with the hungry dog.

INCORRECT

Answer A is correct. *Either* is singular. *Their* is plural. Because *either* refers to boys, the correct pronoun is *his*.



In the following pairs, one sentence is correct, and the other sentence has a pronoun-antecedent agreement error.

A) Neither of the cats destroyed their owners' furniture, but the dog did.

B) Neither of the cats destroyed its owners' furniture, but the dog did.

A) Neither of the cats destroyed their owners' furniture, but the dog did.

INCORRECT

B) Neither of the cats destroyed its owners' furniture, but the dog did.

Answer B is correct. *Neither* is singular. *Their* is plural. *Its* is singular. Because *neither* refers to cats, *its* is correct.

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Misplaced & Dangling Modifiers

