

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Pronouns and their antecedents must agree in person, number, and gender, because a pronoun receives its meaning from its antecedent.

<i>Person</i>	<i>Number</i>	
	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>First</i>	I	We
<i>Second</i>	You	You
<i>Third</i>	He/she/it indefinite pronouns, singular nouns	They plural nouns

<i>Gender</i>	
<i>Masculine</i>	he, nouns naming males
<i>Feminine</i>	she, nouns naming females
<i>Neuter</i>	it, all other nouns

Words such as everybody, anyone, and a person are singular and therefore take singular pronouns. Whether you are writing in first, second, or third person, you shouldn't switch to another of these mid-sentence.

<i>Nonstandard</i>	When each student comes to class, your homework should be ready.
<i>Standard</i>	When each student comes to class, his or her homework should be ready.

The gender of a pronoun must match its antecedent, not any other noun which it may modify.

<i>Nonstandard</i>	Sara invited his son to join the community picnic.
<i>Standard</i>	Sara invited her son to join the community picnic.

The English language does not have a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun, but in recent years "they" and its forms have gained considerable traction in this role. Since we don't always know the gender of the person of whom we're speaking, we can use "they" instead of the unwieldy "he or she" to include all genders as possibilities for that person.

<i>Awkward Standard</i>	Someone robbed my apartment – he or she even stole my lucky penny!
<i>Concise Nonstandard</i>	Someone robbed my apartment – they even stole my lucky penny!

Also, people who don't identify with traditional he/she pronouns may choose to use the pronoun 'they' or some other gender-neutral singular pronoun to refer to themselves.

The information and examples on this handout are taken both directly and indirectly from the following sources: Bullock, Brody, & Weinberg's The Little Seagull Handbook, Palmquist & Wallraff's In Conversation, Fowler & Aaron's The Little, Brown Handbook, and Purdue University's Purdue OWL website. This handout is for personal use only and is not intended for reproduction or distribution.



The Writing Center (SVLLC)

MLK 3315

writingcenter@bowiestate.edu –301-860-3720