PRONOUN PROBLEMS

WHAT ARE PRONOUNS?

A pronoun replaces a noun with words like she, they, your, their, it, etc. We use these words to avoid repetition.

Non-Pronoun: Students can view the students' grades online.
Pronoun: Students can view their grades online. (Their replaces students.)

Non-Pronoun: My computer was broken, so I asked my roommate to fix my computer.
Pronoun: My computer was broken, so I asked my roommate to fix it. (It replaces my computer.)

SHIFT IN PERSON

"Person" refers to the "who" of a sentence. Review the following first, second, and third person pronouns to get a feel for these categories.

1st person singular: I, my, me
1st person plural: we, our, us

2nd person singular: you, your
2nd person plural: you (Informally expressed "you guys"), your

3rd person singular: he, she, his, her, him, it, its
3rd person plural: they, their, them

Avoid unnecessarily changing the "person" in sentences or paragraphs.

Unnecessary Shift: Many parents spank their children out of anger and frustration, but this is no excuse. You must first calm down before deciding how to discipline your children. (Notice the shift fro 3rd person plural [parentsly, their] to 2nd person [you, your])

Better: Many parents spank their children out of anger and frustration, but this is no excuse. They must first calm down before deciding how to discipline their children.

Unnecessary Shift: If a student wants an exciting summer job, they can work in a national park. You won't earn a lot of money, but the recreational opportunities are amazing. (Notice the shift from 3rd person singular [a student] to 3rd person plural [they], then to 2nd person [you].)

Better: If students want to earn extra money during the summer, they can work in a national park. They won't earn a lot of money, but the recreation opportunities are amazing.

Many shifts in person are logical and necessary. In the following example, the first person singular (I) remembers good times with a first person plural (we).

Correct: My friends are gone now, but I will never forget the good times we had our last summer together.

THE GENERAL "YOU"

To avoid sounding pompous, some writers use "you" instead of "one" to refer to a non-specific person. Depending on the formality of the writing, this can be acceptable when used sparingly and when the sentence is an obvious generalization.

Acceptable: When someone yells "fire" in a crowded building, you don't stick around to ask questions.
However, repeatedly addressing the reader as "you" can sound accusatory, as if pointing your finger directly at the reader.

Accusatory: Once you understand the causes of obesity, you can start changing your lifestyle.

Better: Once people understand the causes of obesity, they can start changing their lifestyle.

The following sentences use different ways of generalizing the person. One version is not necessarily correct or incorrect, but each has a slightly different effect. The audience and the formality of the writing also play a role in which version to choose.

When it comes to recycling, **one** can always do better (or) **we** can always do better (or) **people** can always do better.

PRONOUN AGREEMENT IN NUMBER

A common error is to use "they" (a plural pronoun) when referring to a singular noun. While this may be considered normal everyday speech, avoid it in formal writing.

Incorrect: I hate it when **a customer** doesn't know what **they** want.

Correct: I hate it when **customers** don't know what **they** want.
Also: I hate it when **a customer** doesn't know what **he or she** wants.

SEXIST USE OF PRONOUNS

Avoid favoring one gender when referring to nonspecific persons. This mistake is especially common in stereotyping particular professions or activities as essentially male or female.

Sexist: A good doctor will always listen to his patients. (What about the female doctors?)
Sexist: A student must apply to the nursing program if she wishes to become a nurse. (Men are also nurses.)

An effective solution, when possible, is to make the noun and pronouns plural so they become gender neutral.

Non-Sexist: Good doctors will always listen to their patients.
Non-Sexist: Students must apply to the nursing program if they wish to become a nurse.

Another possibility is to rephrase the sentence completely.

Non-Sexist: Listening to patients is the hallmark of a good doctor.
Non-Sexist: Students who want to become nurses must apply to the nursing program.

The following examples represent additional options. However, these constructions can be awkward and wordy.

Non-Sexist: A good doctor will always listen to his/her patients.
Non-Sexist: A student must apply to the nursing program if he or she wishes to become a nurse.

WHO VS THAT

Use the pronoun "who" when referring to people.

Incorrect: I know a man **that** climbed Mount Everest.
Correct: I know a man **who** climbed Mount Everest.

VAGUE PRONOUNS

Remember that a pronoun replaces a noun, so that instead of saying "My roommate dropped off his car so that I could fix the car," we say, "My roommate dropped off his car so that I could fix it." "It" replaces "car." Problems arise when it is not clear which noun the pronoun refers to.

Vague: My roommate dropped off his car and computer so that I could fix it. (What does "it" refer to, the car or the computer?)
Better: My roommate dropped off his computer for me to repair. He also dropped of his car.

This
The word "this" can cause confusion because it can refer to anything—a phenomenon, situation, or group of things.

Vague: The music at the concert was too loud and the crowd was too wild. The food was terrible, and it rained for two hours. This made me feel sick the next day. (Does "this" refer to any single thing or the whole set of circumstances?)

Better: The music at the concert was too loud and the crowd was too wild. The food was terrible, and it rained for two hours. The bad food and chilly weather made me feel sick the next day.

That
Make sure it is clear whether "that" refers to many things or one thing specifically.

Vague: He said he got stuck in traffic and blew a tire. He also said he got a ticket just before he arrived. That seems pretty unlikely to me.

Better: He said he got stuck in traffic and blew a tire. He also said he ran out of gas just before he arrived. Running out of gas seems pretty unlikely to me.

Also: He said he got stuck in traffic and blew a tire. He also said he ran out of gas just before he arrived. It seems unlikely that all these things would happen in one trip.

People
When discussing multiple persons, make sure it is clear who the pronouns "he/she/they/him/her" refer to.

Vague: My mom and sister went shopping last night. My mom bought my sister new shoes, but when they came home she decided she didn't like them.

Better: My mom and sister went shopping last night. My mom bought my sister new shoes, but when they came home my sister decided she didn't like them.