Using Pronouns Clearly

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Summary: This section has information about how to use pronouns correctly.

Because a pronoun REFERS to a noun or TAKES THE PLACE OF that noun, you have to use the correct pronoun so that your reader clearly understands which noun your pronoun is referring to.

Therefore, pronouns should:

1. **Agree in number**
   If the pronoun takes the place of a singular noun, you have to use a singular pronoun.

   If a student parks a car on campus, he or she has to buy a parking sticker.
   (INCORRECT: If a student parks a car on campus, they have to buy a parking sticker.)

   Remember: the words everybody, anybody, anyone, each, neither, nobody, someone, a person, etc. are singular and take singular pronouns.

   Everybody ought to do his or her best.
   (INCORRECT: their best)

   Neither of the girls brought her umbrella.
   (INCORRECT: their umbrellas)

   NOTE: Many people find the construction "his or her" wordy, so if it is possible to use a plural noun as your antecedent and thus you can use "they" as your pronoun, it may be wise to do so. If you do use a singular noun and the context makes the gender clear, then it is permissible to use just "his" or "her" rather than "his or her."

2. **Agree in person**
   If you are writing in the first person (I), don't confuse your reader by switching to the second person (you) or third person (he, she, they, it, etc.). Similarly, if you are using the second person, don't switch to first or third.

   When a person comes to class, he or she should have his or her homework ready.
   (INCORRECT: When a person comes to class, you should have your homework ready.)

3. **Refer clearly to a specific noun.**
   Don't be vague or ambiguous.

   INCORRECT: Although the motorcycle hit the tree, it was not damaged.
(Is "it" the motorcycle or the tree?)

INCORRECT: I don't think they should show violence on TV.

(Who are "they"?)

INCORRECT: Vacation is coming soon, which is nice.

(What is nice, the vacation or the fact that it is coming soon?)

INCORRECT: George worked in a national forest last summer. This may be his life's work.

(What word does "this" refer to?)

INCORRECT: If you put this sheet in your notebook, you can refer to it.

(What does "it" refer to, the sheet or your notebook?)

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### Pronoun Case

Pronoun Case is really a very simple matter. There are three cases.

- Subjective case: pronouns used as subject.
- Objective case: pronouns used as objects of verbs or prepositions.
- Possessive case: pronouns which express ownership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns as Subjects</th>
<th>Pronouns as Objects</th>
<th>Pronouns that show Possession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>my (mine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your (yours)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>him, her, it</td>
<td>his, her (hers), it (its)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>our (ours)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>them</td>
<td>their (theirs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>whom</td>
<td>whose</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The pronouns **This, That, These, Those**, and **Which** do not change form.

**Some problems of case:**
1. In compound structures, where there are two pronouns or a noun and a pronoun, drop the other noun for a moment. Then you can see which case you want.
Not: Bob and me travel a good deal.
(Would you say, "me travel"?)

Not: He gave the flowers to Jane and I.
(Would you say, "he gave the flowers to I"?)

Not: Us men like the coach.
(Would you say, "us like the coach"?)

2. In comparisons. Comparisons usually follow than or as:

He is taller than I (am tall).

This helps you as much as (it helps) me.

She is as noisy as I (am).

Comparisons are really shorthand sentences which usually omit words, such as those in the parentheses in the sentences above. If you complete the comparison in your head, you can choose the correct case for the pronoun.

Not: He is taller than me.
(Would you say, "than me am tall"?)

3. In formal and semiformal writing:

Use the subjective form after a form of the verb to be.
Formal: It is I.
Informal: It is me.

Use whom in the objective case.
Formal: To whom am I talking?
Informal: Who am I talking to?