

## Pronouns

Pronouns replace proper nouns in sentences, but the number of pronouns is very small compared to the number of proper nouns in English. By necessity, then, pronouns are **general** rather than specific. This design, however, means that pronouns are often **broadly interpreted**, which can result in several distinct problems.

### Agreement

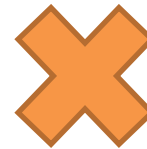
The English language includes many **indefinite pronouns** that we think of as plural, but that are grammatically singular. This category of pronoun includes:

<b>anybody</b>	<b>anyone</b>	<b>anything</b>
<b>everybody</b>	<b>everyone</b>	<b>everything</b>
<b>nobody</b>	<b>no one</b>	<b>nothing</b>
<b>somebody</b>	<b>someone</b>	<b>something</b>
<b>each</b>	<b>either</b>	<b>neither</b>

Ex. **Everyone in my neighborhood locks their door at night.**

Singular

Plural



In this case, a better solution to the agreement problem is to avoid singular indefinite pronouns as subjects and instead use proper nouns.

Ex. **All of my neighbors lock their doors at night.**

Plural      Plural Verb      Plural



Notice that, in this configuration, the verb must change to plural and the **object noun** “door” must become **plural** as well. If “door” remained singular, the sentence would suggest that “all of your neighbors” collectively lock one door every night.

With **compound subjects** (subjects that contain more than one noun), correct usage becomes more difficult to determine.

Ex. **Bill and Ted worked on their history project.**

Plural Compound

Plural

The above example uses the **plural possessive pronoun** “their” because the two people, joined by the **conjunction** “and”, are working collectively on a project that belongs to both of them. However, if the two nouns in the compound subject are joined by “nor” or “or”, they should be treated as **distinct** and the **possessive pronoun should be singular**.

**Ex. Neither Bill nor Ted finished his history project.**



Finally, when the compound subject is formed by the **combination of a singular and plural noun** using any conjunction (*and, nor, or*), the possessive pronoun should be plural. Note that the singular noun should always come before the plural noun in such cases.

**Ex. Either Bill or the princesses will play their instruments.**

## **Shifting**

When using many pronouns in a single sentence, some writers will mistakenly shift pronouns from one form to another. This shifting can be confusing for readers, especially whenever the writer uses the pronoun “one” to suggest a hypothetical person.

**Ex. In writing, one should avoid unclear statements to ensure that your ideas are understood.**

With this case, “one”  “you”. But it should remain “one”.

**Ex. In writing, one should avoid unclear statements to ensure that one’s ideas are understood.**

## **Vague Pronouns**

Nearly any of the pronouns in English can create confusion about which proper nouns they are replacing in a sentence, but this problem is especially true with *it*, *that*, and *this*.

**Ex. It is possible to mix baking soda, vegetable oil and water, but do not mix it with vinegar.**

In the above example, the first clause includes three different nouns, while the second clause replaces one of these nouns with “it” but does not clarify which of the three previous nouns this “it” replaces. For the sake of clarity:

**Ex. It is possible to mix baking soda, vegetable oil and water, but do not mix *baking soda* with vinegar.**