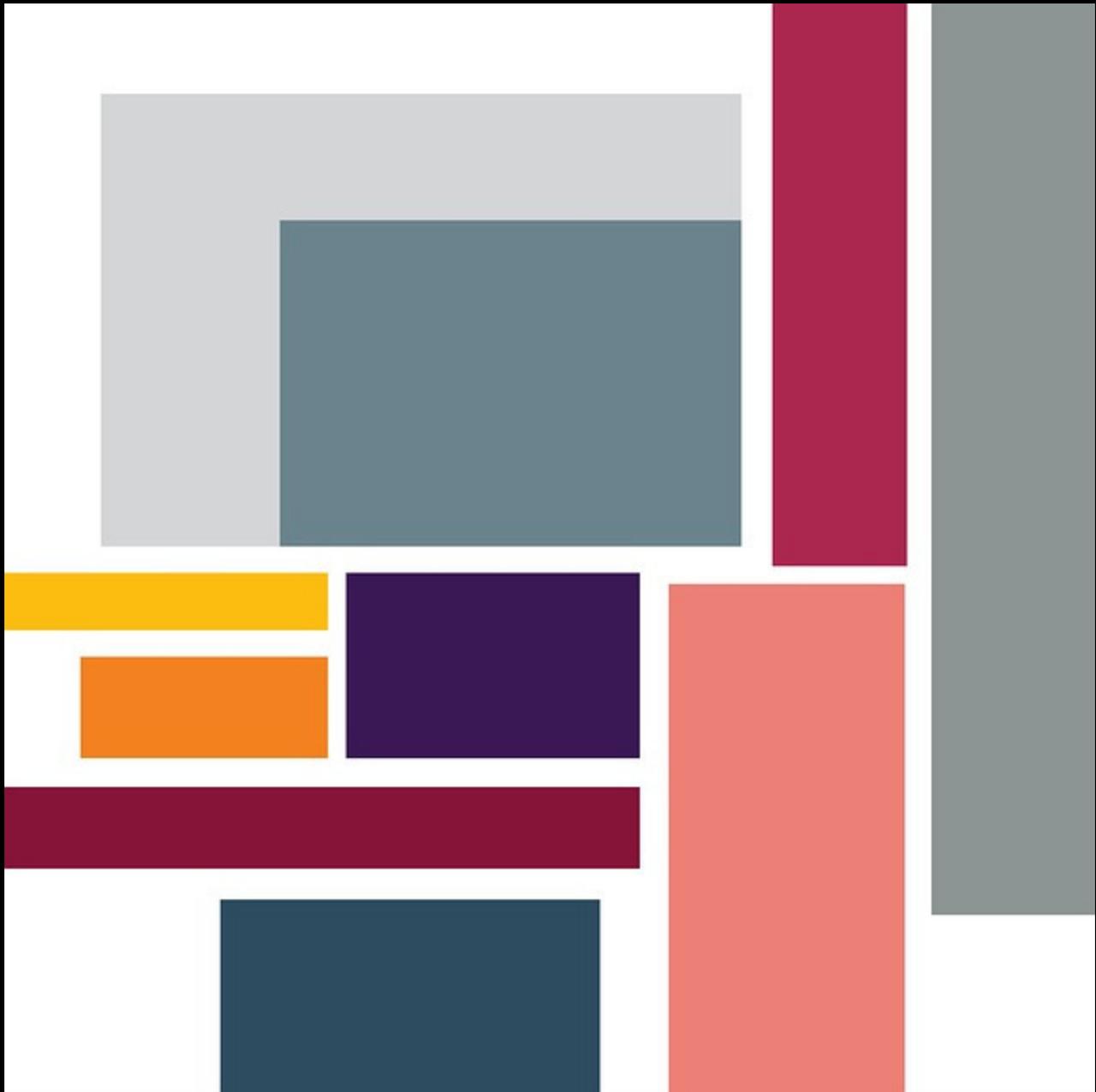


Pronoun Agreement



Pronoun Agreement

Lesson & Exercises

A **pronoun** is a word such as *he, she, it, them, their, or us* that is used to replace a noun.

- **The ball** is on the table. → **It** is on the table.
- **Katie** threw the ball. → **She** threw the ball.

An **antecedent** is simply the noun, pronoun, or gerund to which a pronoun refers. Although the prefix *ante-* means “before,” an antecedent can appear either before or after the noun. (If you find the term *antecedent* confusing, you can use *referent* instead.)

All pronouns must **agree** with their antecedents in number: singular pronouns must agree with singular nouns, and plural pronouns must agree with plural nouns.

For example:

- Katie dribbled the ball, and then she shot **it** at the basket.

The pronoun and the antecedent agree because the singular noun *ball* is the antecedent of the singular pronoun *it*.

Now, consider this:

- Katie dribbled the ball, and then she shot **them** at the basket.

In this case, there is a disagreement between the antecedent and the pronoun because the antecedent *ball* is singular and the pronoun *them* is plural.

A. Speaking in General: One, You & We

Unlike some other languages, English does not have just one pronoun used for impersonal constructions. Instead, it has three: *one, you, and we*.

Although there are situations in which one of these options may be preferable – *one*, for example, is more formal than either *you* or *we* – the only hard and fast rule is that pronouns **should not be mixed and matched within a sentence or paragraph**. If you start out using *you*, continue using that pronoun; the same goes for *one* and *we*.

Incorrect: If **one** wants to avoid insect invasions, **you** should refrain from leaving crumbs lying on the floor.

Incorrect: If **you** want to avoid insect invasions, **we** should refrain from leaving crumbs lying on the floor.

Correct: If **you** want to avoid insect invasions, **you** should refrain from leaving crumbs lying on the floor.

B. Singular vs. Plural

Sometimes different pronouns are used to refer to people and to things.

People (e.g., actors, judges, athletes):

Singular Nouns	Plural Nouns
He or she	They
His or her	Their

Note: Because many writers find *he or she/his or her* wordy and awkward, a common alternative is to use *they* or *their*. While this option technically creates a disagreement, it is also a simple, relatively mainstream solution. That said, it is still looked down on by some grammar purists, so consider your audience when using this option.

Debatable: A person who wishes to become an Olympic-caliber athlete must devote virtually all of **their** time to training.

Correct: A person who wishes to become an Olympic-caliber athlete must devote virtually all of **his or her** time to training.

Incorrect: People who wish to become Olympic-caliber athletes must devote virtually all of **his or her** time to training.

Correct: People who wish to become Olympic-caliber athletes must devote virtually all of **their** time to training.

Things (e.g., cities, books, ideas):

Singular Nouns	Plural Nouns
It	They
Its	Their
This	These
That	Those

Incorrect: When the economy does poorly, **their** performance is of intense interest to the public.

Correct: When the economy does poorly, **its** performance is of intense interest to the public.

Incorrect: The lights began to flicker wildly, and only moments later **it** went out altogether.

Correct: The lights began to flicker wildly, and only moments later **they** went out altogether.

Collective nouns refer to groups, e.g., *committee, board, council, jury, university, agency, institute, government, city, country*). In American English – unlike British English – these nouns are considered **singular**.

Correct: The university has recently released **its** updated financial aid policies.

When the focus is on the individuals that make up the group, however, the plural should be used.

Correct: The members of the committee **agree** that new policies are required.