

AVOIDING DEMONSTRATIVE STRUCTURES AND AMBIGUOUS PRONOUNS

In the English language, three words seem to cause more confusion than any other words: They are IT, THIS, and THAT.

Consider this passage:

In order to get this to work, you must make sure that this is plugged in here. This should be put here, and this should be set to that. It should not be set to this; otherwise, all of it will probably do that.

Now, try this passage:

In order to get your blender to work, you must make sure that the power plug is inserted into the wall. This plug should be here, while the power is set to low. The power should not be set to full; otherwise, all of the contents will fly through the air.

Which passage seems more specific, much clearer, and more concrete in terms of understanding? Obviously, the second passage...

Demonstratives, which are more numerous in the first passage, along with ambiguous pronouns do not always allow for clarity in sentences. You can easily see why...

DEMONSTRATIVE STRUCTURES

Demonstratives do two things: They may function either a pronouns or determiners. When used as pronouns, especially in the beginning of sentences, these words can be very problematic.

THIS (a Pronoun and/or a Determiner)
THAT (a Pronoun and/or a Determiner)
THESE (a Pronoun and/or a Determiner)
THOSE (a Pronoun and/or a Determiner)

GUIDELINES FOR THIS

Avoid the use THIS in the subject of a sentence.

EX:

This was cool. (Worse)
The pizza party in our class was cool. (Better)

Consider that you may use THIS as a determiner, but not as a pronoun.

EX:

This is a classic. (Worse)
This car is a classic. (Better)

When using the word THIS, you should make sure to have a supporting noun placed next to THIS (making the word work as a determiner rather than a pronoun).

Notice the THIS + a NOUN adds to the clarity of the sentence.

Additionally, be mindful of defining an antecedent (the original noun) before using THIS as a pronoun.

EX:

Last night, Jennifer won an award; this was very exciting.

GUIDELINES FOR THAT

Avoid the use THAT in the subject of a sentence. Even in an emphatic expression, THAT may cause confusion.

EX:

That was wrong. (Worse)

Hitting Jake on the head was wrong. (Better)

When using the word THAT, you should make sure to have a supporting noun placed next to THAT (making the word work as a determiner rather than a pronoun). Consider that you may use THAT as a determiner, but not as a pronoun.

EX:

That is the dog that bit Tyler. (Worse)

That dog bit Tyler. (Better)

Notice the THAT + a NOUN adds to the clarity of the sentence.

Additionally, be mindful of defining an antecedent (the original noun) before using THAT as a pronoun.

EX:

Our monkey has had diarrhea three times this week; that is indicative of an intestinal infection.

THAT (SUBORDINATION)

"That" should only be used as a subordinate conjunction to indicate the presence of a dependent clause.

EX:

I wish that I could fly.

"That I could fly" is a dependent clause.

THESE & THOSE

THESE and THOSE are words, which also act as pronouns and/or determiners. Typically, when used as determiners, the clarity of the sentence is better. However, when used at the beginning of sentences as pronouns, you should be careful.

EX: (Worse)

These are good for your health.

Those are good for your health.

EX: (Better)

These supplements are good for your health.

Those supplements are good for your health.

Notice the THESE/THOSE + a NOUN adds to the clarity of the sentence.

Additionally, be mindful of defining an antecedent (the original noun) before using THESE or THOSE as pronouns.

EX:

I really like horses; these are wonderful.

I really like horses; those are wonderful.

AMBIGUOUS PRONOUNS

Ambiguous means "unclear." Generally, pronouns make things unclear. The worst offender in the English language is the pronoun IT; however, all pronouns may cause confusion. Therefore, as a rule of thumb, be very selective when using pronouns in academic and professional writing.

GUIDELINES FOR IT

When using the word IT, you should make sure to have already mentioned the antecedent of the pronoun. Usually, you should have IT appear as a part of a compound sentence rather than using IT as the beginning subject in a sentence.

EX:

It is confusing. (Worse)

The test was difficult; it was confusing. (Better)

Note: If you have one specific antecedent, then you may use "it" after the antecedent is named. However, if you do not have a single antecedent, then do not use "it."

OTHER PRONOUNS

Generally, you should always use the antecedent rather than a pronoun.

EX:

Mike took Jim to see the football game. He really liked the game. (Not Clear)

(Even though we might assume that "Jim" likes the game... we cannot be absolutely positive).

Therefore, use the antecedent (the original noun) for the sake of clarity (even at the expense of seeming repetitious).

EX:

Mike took Jim to see the football game. Jim really liked the game. (Clear)