

GUIDELINES FOR CORRECT PRONOUN REFERENCING

A frequent weakness in writing occurs when writers do not have clear antecedents for their pronouns. An important rule to remember is if there is a pronoun, with few exceptions, there must be an antecedent for that pronoun. Some common errors that should be avoided follow:

Note: Remember, the antecedent is the noun or pronoun that is being renamed by a pronoun.

Ambiguous reference occurs when one pronoun could refer to either of two antecedents. In other words, there could be more than one meaning.

Ambiguous: John told his uncle that **he** should buy a new car. [The *he* in this sentence could refer to either John or his uncle.]

Clear: John told his uncle to buy a new car.
John said to his uncle, "I need to buy a new car."
John said to his uncle, "You need to buy a new car."

Ambiguous: As soon as Valerie and Christine arrived, we asked her about her trip to Hawaii.

Clear: As soon as Valerie and Christine arrived, we asked Valerie about **her** trip to Hawaii. [Christine could be used as well as Valerie. The critical thing is that the reader know exactly who *her* refers to.]

General reference occurs when a pronoun refers to a general idea rather than a specific word or group of words. Pronouns frequently used in general reference are *this, that, it, and which*.

General: All the way home from the airport Alice would not stop talking, *which* certainly aggravated Jenny, who was driving..

Clear: Alice's constant talking all the way home from the airport certainly aggravated Jenny, who was driving.

Note: When *which* is used as a relative pronoun, it must rename the noun or pronoun in front of it. An exception would be when there is a prepositional phrase describing the same noun that *which* is renaming. Under those circumstances, the prepositional phrase will come first.

Clear: The *Scera Theater*, *which* is located on State Street in Orem, has always had a strong family emphasis. [The word *which* is renaming Scera

Theater.]

General: When I was a child, I loved to watch the flying trapeze artists when the circus came to town. ***It was always breathtaking for me.***

Clear: *Those experiences* were always breathtaking for me.

Weak reference occurs when a pronoun refers to an antecedent that has not been named.

Weak: I love to take pictures and consider *it* one of my hobbies. [What is *it* referring to?]

Clear: I love to take pictures and consider *photography* one of my hobbies.

Weak: Margaret loves to go to rock shows, but she seldom buys any.

Clear: Margaret loves to go to rock shows, but she seldom buys any rocks.

Indefinite reference occurs when a writer gives an indefinite use to personal pronouns such as *you, it, they*.

Indefinite: In California *they* are always boasting about *their* wonderful weather.

Clear: Californians are always boasting about their wonderful weather.

Indefinite: In some parts of the country *you* can become very isolated if *you* get off the interstate highways.

Clear: In some parts of the country a person can become very isolated if one gets off the interstate highways.

Note: *It* can be used when it refers to **time, distance, or weather**.

Change of voice occurs when the antecedent is a different person (first, second, or third) than the pronoun is.

Inconsistent: Whenever a passenger needs more supplies, all you need to do is call Housekeeping.

Consistent: Whenever a passenger needs more supplies, all he/she needs to do is call Housekeeping.

Consistent: Whenever passengers need more supplies, all they need to do is call Housekeeping.