
Using Pronouns Correctly

You should read this chapter if you need to review or learn about



- ➔ Understanding *case*, the form of a pronoun that shows how it is used in a sentence
- ➔ Using personal pronouns correctly
- ➔ Correcting pronoun reference
- ➔ Revising sexist pronoun reference
- ➔ Using *who*, *which*, *that*

Get Started



You'll recall from Chapter 1 that a *pronoun* is a word used in place of a noun or another pronoun. A pronoun gets its meaning from the noun it replaces, called the *antecedent*.

Case refers to the form of a noun or pronoun that shows how it is used in a sentence.

Overview of Pronoun Case

Only two parts of speech, nouns and pronouns, have *case*. This means that they change form depending on how they are used in a sentence. English has three cases: *nominative*, *objective*, and *possessive*.

- In the *nominative* case, the pronoun is used as a subject.
I threw the ball.
- In the *objective* case, the pronoun is used as an object.
Give the ball to *me*.
- In the *possessive* case, the pronoun is used to show ownership.
The ball is *mine*.

The following chart shows the three cases of personal pronouns:

Nominative	Objective	Possessive
(Pronoun as subject)	(Pronoun as object)	(Ownership)
I	me	my, mine
you	you	your, yours
he	him	his
she	her	her, hers
it	it	its
we	us	our, ours
they	them	their, theirs
who	whom	whose
whoever	whomever	whoever

To avoid errors in personal pronoun use, you must understand how to use each case. The rules are explained below. Relax: They're actually not difficult at all!

Using the Nominative Case

1. Use the nominative case to show the subject of a verb.

Father and (I, me) like to shop at flea markets.

Answer: *I* is the subject of the sentence. Therefore, the pronoun is in the nominative case: "Father and *I* like to shop at flea markets."

To help determine the correct pronoun, take away the first subject and try each choice. See which one sounds better. For example:

I like to shop at flea markets.

Me like to shop at flea markets.

The first one definitely sounds better.

Quick Tip



When you list two or more subjects, always put yourself last. Therefore, the sentence would read “Father and I,” never “I and Father.”

(Who, Whom) do you believe is the better shopper?

Answer: *Who* is the subject of the verb *is*. Therefore, the sentence would read, “*Who* do you believe is the better shopper?”

Ignore interrupting expressions such as *do you believe*, *you think*, *do you suppose* (and so on). They do not affect pronoun case.

2. Use the nominative case for a predicate nominative.

A *predicate nominative* is a noun or pronoun that follows a linking verb and identifies or renames the subject. Remember that a *linking verb* connects a subject to a word that renames it. *Linking verbs* indicate a state of being (*am*, *is*, *are*, etc.), relate to the senses (*look*, *smell*, *taste*, etc.), or indicate a condition (*appear*, *seem*, *become*, etc.).

The salesman of the month was (I, me).

Answer: Use *I*, since the pronoun renames the subject, the salesman of the month. “The salesman of the month was *I*.”

Which is correct: “It is *I*” or “It is *me*”? Technically, the correct form is “It is *I*,” since we’re dealing with a predicate nominative. However, “It is *me*” (and “It is *us*”) has become increasingly acceptable as standard usage.

Using the Objective Case

1. Use the objective case to show a direct object.

A *direct object* is a noun or pronoun that receives the action.

John’s suit no longer fits (he, him).

Answer: John’s suit no longer fits *him*.

(Who, Whom) did she finally invite to the dinner party?

Answer: *She* is the subject, the person doing the action. Therefore, the sentence should read: “*Whom* did she finally invite to the dinner party?”

Of course, she can invite (whoever, whomever) she wants.

Answer: Of course, she can invite *whomever* she wants.

Quick Tip



When you have a pronoun combined with a noun (such as *we guests, us guests*), try the sentence without the noun. You can usually “hear” which pronoun sounds right.

It is always a pleasure for *we* to attend their party.

It is always a pleasure for *us* to attend their party.

The second sentence is correct.

2. Use the objective case to show an indirect object.

An *indirect object* tells *to* or *for* whom something is done. You can tell a word is an indirect object if you can insert *to* or *for* before it without changing the meaning. For example: “The book gave (to) my boss and (to) me some new strategies.”

The bill gave (we, us) a shock.

Answer: The bill gave *us* a shock.

3. Use the objective case for the object of a preposition.

Remember that a preposition is a small word that links a noun or a pronoun following it to another word in the sentence.

Sit by (I, me).

Answer: The pronoun is the object of the preposition *me*, so the sentence reads: “Sit by *me*.”

Using the Possessive Case

1. Use the possessive case to show ownership.

The child refused to admit that the sweater was (her’s, hers).

Answer: *Hers* is the correct spelling of the possessive case, which is needed here to express ownership (belonging to her). Therefore, the sentence should read: “The child refused to admit that the sweater was *hers*.”

2. Use the possessive case before gerunds.

A *gerund* is a form of a verb that acts as a noun. Gerunds always end in *-ing*, and they always function as nouns.

(You, Your) walking in the rain didn’t cause your cold.

Answer: The gerund *walking* requires the possessive pronoun *your*. Therefore, the sentence should read: “*Your walking* in the rain didn’t cause your cold.”

Do you mind (my, me) borrowing your cell phone?

Answer: Do you mind *my* borrowing your cell phone?

- Use some possessive pronouns alone to show ownership.
This cell phone is *mine*, not *yours*.

Three Other Rules for Using Pronouns

Here are three more rules that apply to pronouns and case.

- A pronoun used in apposition with a noun is in the same case as the noun.

An *appositive phrase* is a noun or pronoun that adds information and details. Appositives can often be removed from the sentence, so they are set off with commas. The appositive in the following sentence is underlined.

Two police officers, Alice and (she, her), were commended for bravery.

Answer: The pronoun must be in the nominative case (*she*) because it is in apposition with the noun *police officers*, which is in the nominative case. Therefore, the sentence should read: Two police officers, Alice and she, were commended for bravery.

Exception: *A pronoun used as the subject of an infinitive is in the objective case.* For example: “Juan expects Luz and (I, me) to host the reception.” The correct pronoun here is *me*, since it is the subject of the infinitive *to host*.

Quick Tip



Pronouns that express ownership never get an apostrophe. Watch for these possessive pronouns: *yours, his, hers, its, ours, theirs*.

- Use *-self* forms correctly with reflexive and intensive situations.

As you learned in Chapter 1, *reflexive pronouns* reflect back to the subject or object.

The child embarrassed *himself*.

Don’t use reflexive pronouns in place of subjects and objects.

The boss and (myself, I) had a meeting.

Answer: Use the pronoun *I*, not the reflexive form. Therefore, the sentence reads: “The boss and *I* had a meeting.”

- Who* is the nominative case; *whom* is the objective case.

No one will argue that *who* and *whom* are the most troublesome pronouns in English. Even though *who* and *whom* were discussed earlier in this chapter, these little words cause

such distress that they deserve their own subsection. Let's start by looking back at our pronoun-use chart.

	Nominative	Objective	Possessive
	(Subject case)	(Object case)	(Ownership)
Singular	who	whom	whose
	whoever	whomever	whosoever
Plural	who	whom	whose
	whoever	whomever	whosoever

Now, some guidelines:

- Use *who* or *whoever* when the pronoun is the subject of a verb.
Who won the Nobel Prize this year?
- Use *who* or *whoever* when the pronoun is the predicate nominative.
The winner was *who*?
- Use *whom* or *whomever* when the pronoun is the direct object of a verb or the object of a preposition.
Whom did he fire this week?

Use Correct Pronoun Reference

The meaning of a pronoun comes from its antecedent, the noun or pronoun to which it refers. Your speech and writing will be confusing if your pronoun reference is unclear.

Carelessly placed pronouns can create unintentionally funny sentences as well as confusing ones. Consider the difference between what the writer *thinks* he or she said and what is *really* being said in the following sentences:

Last week, a wart appeared on my right thumb, and I want *it* removed.

(Are you removing the wart or the thumb?)

Guilt and unkindness can be emotionally destructive to you and your friends. You must get rid of *them*.

(Are you getting rid of the guilt or your friends?)

There are three ways to prevent pronoun confusion.

1. A pronoun must clearly refer to a single antecedent.
2. Place pronouns close to their antecedents.
3. Make a pronoun refer to a definite antecedent.

Let's look at each guideline in detail.

1. A pronoun must clearly refer to a single antecedent. A common writing and speech problem occurs when the same pronoun refers to more than one antecedent. For instance, in the last example in the previous section, *them* can refer to *guilt*, *unkindness*, or *your friends*.

Remember that a pronoun replaces a noun. To make sure that your writing and speech are clear, always use the noun first before you use the pronoun. Clarify the sentence by replacing the unclear pronouns with nouns. That way, all the remaining pronouns will clearly refer to a single antecedent.

Guilt and unkindness can be emotionally destructive to you and your friends. You must get rid of *them*.

Here are two ways you could rewrite this sentence:

Guilt and unkindness can be emotionally destructive to you and your friends. You must get rid of *these issues*.

Guilt and unkindness can be emotionally destructive to you and your friends. You must get rid of *these destructive emotions*.

2. Place pronouns close to their antecedents. If too many phrases come between a pronoun and its antecedent, the sentence can be difficult to read and understand. This can happen even if the intervening material is logically related to the rest of the sentence. Consider the following sentence:

After meeting a few guests, the President entered the reception. At that point, Senator Chin and the other elected officials began to pose for pictures. Even so, *he* did not join them.

In this sentence *he* is too far away from its antecedent, the President. One solution is to replace *he* with *the President*. The other solution is to rewrite the sentences to move the pronoun closer.

After meeting a few guests, the President entered the reception. At that point, Senator Chin and the other elected officials began to pose for pictures. Even so, the President did not join them.

After meeting a few guests, the President entered the reception. He did not join Senator Chin and the other elected officials, even though they began to pose for pictures.

Quick Tip



When you start a new paragraph, repeat the noun from the previous paragraph rather than using a pronoun in its place. Repeating the noun (usually a name) can help your reader more easily follow your logic.

3. Make a pronoun refer to a definite antecedent. Be sure all pronouns refer to only one antecedent. The pronouns *it*, *this*, *that*, and *which* are especially prone to unclear pronoun reference. Consider the following sentence:

I told my friends that I was going to be a rock star, which annoyed my mother.

The following form is better because it is less ambiguous:

My mother was annoyed because I told my friends that I was going to be a rock star.

The Generic Masculine Pronoun

Pronouns have number, person, and gender.

Definition	Example
<i>Number</i> shows amount. (singular or plural)	Lenny has changed <i>his</i> plans. Lenny and Sam have changed <i>their</i> plans.
<i>Person</i> indicates whether the pronoun refers to the first person (<i>I</i> : the person speaking), second person (<i>you</i> : the person spoken to), or third person (<i>she</i> : person, place, or thing spoken about).	<i>I</i> like to read mysteries. <i>You</i> can get them in the library. <i>Jill</i> is studying math, which <i>she</i> needs.
<i>Gender</i> may be masculine, feminine, or neuter.	<i>He</i> is a butcher; <i>she</i> is a baker. <i>It</i> is a fine car.

Traditionally, a masculine pronoun was used to refer to a single antecedent whose gender is not specified.

A student should turn in *his* assignments on time.

This usage is no longer considered correct, since it is sexist language. You can use both the masculine and feminine pronouns or recast the sentence to make the pronoun plural:

A student should turn in *his or her* assignments on time.

Students should turn in *their* assignments on time.

Which choice is best? Consider rewriting these sentences to make the pronoun plural because this results in smoother sentences.

Using *Who*, *Which*, *That*

Special rules govern the use of the relative pronouns *who*, *which*, and *that*.

1. *Who* refers to people or animals (only animals with names or special talents, like Lassie).
She is not the actress *who* was originally cast in the role.
2. *That* and *which* refer to things, groups, and unnamed animals.

The choice between *which* and *that* depends on whether the clause introduced by the pronoun is *restrictive* or *nonrestrictive*.

- A *restrictive* clause is essential to the sentence.
- A *nonrestrictive* clause adds extra meaning, is set off by commas, and can be removed from the sentence.

Use *that* for restrictive clauses and *which* with nonrestrictive clauses.

Once, at a social gathering, Gladstone said to Disraeli, “I predict, sir, *that* you will die either by hanging or by some vile disease.” (restrictive clause)

Disraeli replied, “*That* all depends, sir, upon whether I embrace your principles or your mistress.” (restrictive clause)

Postage meters, *which* are easy to use, are available at the book store. (nonrestrictive clause)

Quick Tip



In spoken English, *who* and *whomever* are becoming more and more uncommon. Informally, people use *who* and *whoever* in almost all situations.



It's a Wrap

- ✓ *Case* is the form of a noun or pronoun that shows how it is used in a sentence.
- ✓ English has three cases: *nominative*, *objective*, and *possessive*.
- ✓ Use the *nominative* case to show the subject of a verb; use the *objective* case to show the object of a verb; use the *possessive* case to show ownership.
- ✓ Make a pronoun clearly refer to a single, definite antecedent.
- ✓ Place pronouns close to their antecedents.



Test Yourself

QUESTIONS

True-False Questions

1. *Case* refers to the way a noun or pronoun changes, depending on how it is used in a sentence.
2. English has three cases: *nominative*, *objective*, and *possessive*.
3. In the *nominative case*, the pronoun is used to show possession.
4. In the *possessive case*, the pronoun is used as an object.
5. *Who* is in the *nominative case*; *whom* is in the *objective case*.
6. A *predicate nominative* is a noun or pronoun that follows a linking verb and identifies or renames the subject.

7. Use the objective case to show the object of a noun, verb, or adjective.
8. Gerunds always end in *-ed*, and they always function as verbs.
9. A pronoun used in apposition with a noun is in the same case as the noun.
10. A pronoun used as the subject of an infinitive is in the subjective case.
11. Pronouns that express ownership always take an apostrophe.
12. Use reflexive pronouns in place of subjects and objects.
13. A pronoun must clearly refer to a single, definite antecedent.
14. Place pronouns close to their antecedents.
15. *Who* refers to people or animals, while *that* and *which* refer to things, groups, and unnamed animals.

Completion Questions

Select the word that best completes each sentence.

1. Trish and (I, me) have decided to move to Brazil.
2. The new employees are (they, them).
3. The problem is unquestionably (she, her).
4. Human beings, (who, whom) are the most fascinating species on earth, are also the most admirable.
5. Those (whom, who) are early to bed and early to rise are healthy, wealthy, and very tired.
6. The best dressed employee has always been (him, he).
7. The winning contestants are the Griffels and (they, them).
8. The concept (which, that) intrigued (we, us) had not yet been publicized.
9. My car, (who, which) was brand new, had relatively little damage.
10. The car (which, that) hit me was speeding.
11. From (who, whom) did you buy that beautiful purse?
12. The thunderstorm frightened my cat and (I, me).
13. Please sit next to Rita and (me, I).
14. Brenda gave (he, him) a lot of unsolicited advice.
15. With (who, whom) have you agreed to carpool?

Multiple-Choice Questions

Select the best revision for each sentence.

1. When Harry and Chuck return home, he will call.
 - (a) When Harry and Chuck return home, they will call.
 - (b) When Harry and Chuck return home, Harry will call.

- (c) When Harry and Chuck return home, him will call.
 - (d) When Harry and Chuck return home, calling will take place.
2. When Marcia spoke to Margery that morning, she did not realize that she would win the international bodybuilding contest.
- (a) When Marcia spoke to Margery that morning, her did not realize that she would win the international bodybuilding contest.
 - (b) When Marcia spoke to Margery that morning, they did not realize that she would win the international bodybuilding contest.
 - (c) When Marcia spoke to Margery that morning, Marcia did not realize that she would win the international bodybuilding contest.
 - (d) When Marcia spoke to Margery that morning, no one realized that she would win the international bodybuilding contest.
3. When the rain started, we pulled out an umbrella. It annoyed the people around us, but we decided to stay at the ball field.
- (a) When the rain started, we pulled out an umbrella. It's annoyed the people around us, but we decided to stay at the ball field.
 - (b) When the rain started, we pulled out an umbrella. Its annoyed the people around us, but we decided to stay at the ball field.
 - (c) When the rain started, we pulled out an umbrella. The umbrella annoyed people around us, but we decided to stay at the ball field.
 - (d) When the rain started, we pulled out an umbrella. They annoyed the people around us, but we decided to stay at the ball field.
4. If you asked Dick to describe Rudy, he would say that he was sly, boring, and cheap—and then he would snicker.
- (a) If you asked Dick to describe Rudy, Dick would say that he was sly, boring, and cheap—and then Dick would snicker.
 - (b) If you asked Dick to describe Rudy, Dick would say that he was sly, boring, and cheap—and then he would snicker.
 - (c) If you asked Dick to describe Rudy, he would say that he was sly, boring, and cheap—and then snickering would occur.
 - (d) If you asked Dick to describe Rudy, Rudy would say that Rudy was sly, boring, and cheap—and then Dick would snicker.
5. They awarded we losers a gag prize.
- (a) They awarded them losers a gag prize.
 - (b) They awarded yours losers a gag prize.
 - (c) They awarded they losers a gag prize.
 - (d) They awarded us losers a gag prize.
6. My neighbor agreed to support he for the condo board.
- (a) My neighbor agreed to support she for the condo board.
 - (b) My neighbor agreed to support him for the condo board.
 - (c) My neighbor agreed to support I for the condo board.
 - (d) My neighbor agreed to support we for the condo board.

7. Naturally, you can invite whoever you want.
 - (a) Naturally, you can invite who you want.
 - (b) Naturally, you can invite which ever you want.
 - (c) Naturally, you can invite whomever you want.
 - (d) Naturally, you can invite that you want.
8. A student must understand that homework is very important to them.
 - (a) Students must understand that homework is very important to them.
 - (b) A student must understand that homework is very important to him.
 - (c) A student must understand that homework is very important to her.
 - (d) A student must understand that homework is very important to I.
9. The story was good, but they didn't explain what happened in the end.
 - (a) The story was good, but he didn't explain what happened in the end.
 - (b) The story was good, but the author didn't explain what happened in the end.
 - (c) The story was good, but she didn't explain what happened in the end.
 - (d) The story was good, but explaining what happened in the end didn't happen.
10. Justin saw the ad on the web page yesterday, but he can't seem to find it today.
 - (a) Justin saw the ad in the web page yesterday, but he can't seem to find the today.
 - (b) Justin saw the ad in the web page yesterday, but he can't seem to find its today.
 - (c) Justin saw the ad in the web page yesterday, but he can't seem to find today.
 - (d) Justin saw the ad in the web page yesterday, but he can't seem to find the ad today.