Pronouns are one of the basic parts of speech. This handout will help you address common errors made when using pronouns.

Note: This handout assumes a basic level of familiarity with pronoun types and forms. If you encounter terminology that you are not familiar with, please see our “Pronouns” handout.

General Rules

**Definition and Function**
A pronoun is a word that stands in for or replaces a noun or a noun phrase.

**Example:** Stacy loves Daniel. **He** is her husband.

*Note:* “He” is a pronoun that takes the place of the noun “Daniel” in the second sentence.

**Antecedents**
An antecedent is the noun or noun phrase that a pronoun replaces.

**Example:** Stacy loves Daniel. He is her husband.

*Note:* “Daniel” is the antecedent of the pronoun “he.”

Common Issues

**Personal Pronouns Grouped with Nouns or Other Pronouns**
Sometimes you may be confused about which form of a personal pronoun to use when that pronoun is paired up with another noun or pronoun. Remember “I,” “he,” and “she” are subject forms, while “me,” “him,” and “her” are object forms.

A simple way to check your pronouns is to remove the other element in the pair.

**Incorrect:** Stacy loves him and I.

**Incorrect:** Stacy loves I.

**Correct:** Stacy loves me.

**Correct:** Stacy loves him and me.

*Note:* The object form “me” is the correct choice because the pronoun is the object of the verb “loves.”
This works for checking subject as well as object pronoun usage.

Incorrect: Daniel and me do not love Stacy.
Incorrect: Me do not love Stacy.
Correct: I do not love Stacy.
Correct: Daniel and I do not love Stacy.

Note: The subject form “I” is the correct choice because the pronoun is the subject of the sentence.

Personal Pronouns in Comparisons
You may also be confused about which form of a personal pronoun to use when that pronoun is part of a comparison.

A simple way to check your pronouns is to write out the rest of the comparison, which is usually left implied.

Incorrect: John is just as charming as me.
Incorrect: John is just as charming as me am charming.
Correct: John is just as charming as I am charming.
Correct: John is just as charming as I.

Note: The subject form “I” is the correct choice because the pronoun is the subject of the clause “I am charming.” Also note that “John is just as charming as I am charming” is probably the best sounding choice.

This also works for checking comparisons using object pronouns.

Incorrect: Stacy loves him more than I.
Incorrect: Stacy loves him more than she loves I.
Correct: Stacy loves him more than she loves me.
Correct: Stacy loves him more than me.

Note: The object form “me” is the correct choice since the pronoun is the object of the clause “she loves me.” However, this sentence could also mean something quite different if it read “Stacy loves him more than I love him.” In that case, “I” would be the correct choice since it is the subject of the clause “I love him.”

“Its” vs “It’s”

One set of words that may confuse you is “its” and “it’s.” “Its” is the possessive form (either a possessive pronoun or adjective). You can remember this by remembering that other possessive pronouns like “hers” and “his” also lack an apostrophe. “It’s” has an apostrophe because it is a contraction of “it is” or “it has,” not because it is possessive.

Example: The team will soon make a decision about its new head coach.

Note: “Its” is a possessive adjective modifying “new head coach.”

Example: It’s raining outside.
Note: “It’s” is a contraction of “it is”. You could replace “it’s” with “it is.”

“Who” vs “Whom”
Another set of words that may confuse you is “who” and “whom.” Remember that “who” is the subject form and “whom” is the object form. Always use “whom” after a preposition.

Example: Who stole the cookie?
Note: “Who” is in the subject form because it is the subject of the sentence.

Example: To whom did you send the letter?
Note: “Whom” is in the object form because it is the object of the preposition “to.”

In spoken English and informal writing, people often detach “whom” from its preposition. “Whom” goes at the beginning of the sentence, and the preposition goes at the end.

Example: Whom did you send the letter to?
Note: This sounds more informal.

Additionally, some speakers even substitute “who” for “whom.” Remember that this is not appropriate for formal writing.

Example: Who did you send the letter to?
Note: This sounds even more informal.

“Who’s vs “Whose”
Yet another confusing set of words is “who’s” and “whose.” Remember that “who’s” is a contraction of “who is” or “who has” while “whose” functions either as a possessive adjective—meaning it has to modify a noun—or as a possessive pronoun—meaning that it has to replace a noun.

Example: Who’s going to dinner?
Note: “Who’s” is a contraction of “who is.” The sentence could be rewritten as “Who is going to dinner?”

Example: Whose did you prefer more?
Note: “Whose” is a possessive pronoun. You could not replace it with “who is” or “who has.”

Sexist Pronouns
Since the English language lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun (besides “it,” which refers only to objects), avoiding gender bias can be a challenge. However, there are ways to prevent sexist language without creating unnecessary awkwardness.

Before sexist language was widely recognized as a problem, writers commonly used male pronouns when making generalities. In the example below, the writer assumes that “a doctor” is male.

Sexist: Before a doctor prescribes medication, he must consider potential side effects.

One way you can rewrite this sentence is to replace “he” with “he or she”. Depending on your style guide, “he/she” and “s/he” might be other acceptable options.

Not sexist: Before a doctor prescribes medication, he or she must consider potential side effects.
However, frequent repetition of “he or she” can make a piece of writing awkward. For this reason, it is sometimes better to make the antecedent plural.

Not sexist: Before doctors prescribe medication, they must consider potential side effects.

When discussing things that are universal, another option is to replace “he” with the generic pronoun “one,” which does not indicate a specific gender.

Not sexist: One should be kind to others.

Finally, it is also important to avoid sexist possessive adjectives. This can be accomplished by changing the possessive adjective to an article (a, an, the).

Sexist: Who left his book on the desk?

Not sexist: Who left a book on the desk?

Note: For more information on how to avoid sexist pronouns in your writing, please see our “Inclusive Language” handout.

References


