

Pronoun-Noun Agreement

Pronouns stand-in for nouns so that writing is not repetitive. A **noun** is a naming word (for a thing) and is often several words as part of a **noun phrase**. A **pronoun** represents a noun or noun phrase. A sentence without pronouns would be a very odd sentence:

- *Donald Trump delivered on Donald Trump’s promise that Donald Trump would “Make America Great Again”.*

It is much more natural to use pronouns:

- *Donald Trump renewed his promise that he would “Make America Great Again”.*

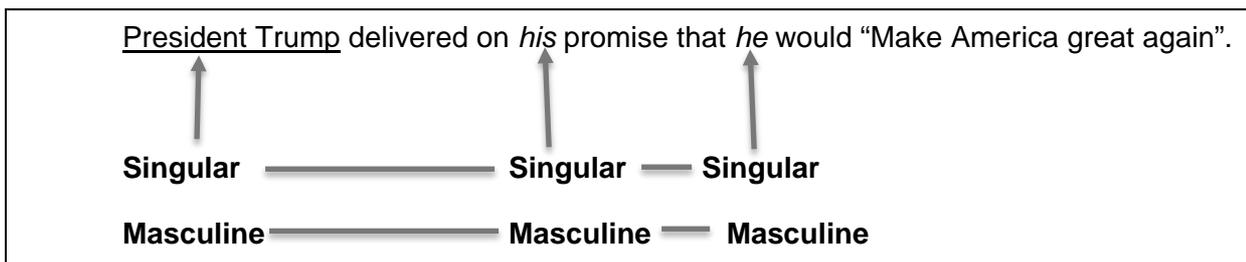
There are many different kinds of pronouns:

- Relative (*who, whom, whose, which, that*)
- Possessive (*my, your, her, his, their*)
- Personal (*I, you, he, she, we, they*)
- Interrogative (*who? what? which?*)
- Reflexive (*myself, herself, yourself*)
- Indefinite (*anyone, something, everyone*)
- Demonstrative (*this, that, these, those*)

Pronoun-Noun agreement

Like the noun-verb agreement rule (see the helpsheet **Subject-Verb Agreement**), the pronoun-noun agreement rule is that *every pronoun must agree with the noun to which it refers*.

There are a number of ways they can agree, and many different pronouns, but the general format is to keep everything in agreement in terms of number and gender.



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In this example, the noun is singular as it refers to a single identifier (namely, Donald Trump), and as he is a male, the pronoun must be masculine. The following mistakes and difficulties can arise with noun-pronoun agreement:

Problems with Pronoun-Noun Agreement

Compound subjects joined by a conjunction: When joining nouns with a conjunction (“and” or “but”) into a noun phrase, a plural form is used for the pronoun:

- James' Mum and Dad think that *their* son's essay is excellent (not "his and her").

In this case, the two people are considered a pair, not individuals—and therefore plural (more than one).

Compound subjects joined by or/nor: When singular and plural nouns are joined by "or/nor" the pronoun must agree with the noun that is closest to it:

- Neither the company director, nor the workers, raised *their* concerns (Here the nearest noun to the verb is plural so the pronoun is plural).

Note that it would be odd to put a plural noun before a singular noun (although this satisfies the rule):

- Neither the workers, nor the company director, raised *his* concerns (did the workers raise their concerns separately?)

The sentence will usually be clearer and sound more natural-sounding if the plural noun is placed in second position.

Gender and Indefinite Pronouns: When the gender of a noun is unknown—or if it refers to both males and females in general—it is customary to use *both* masculine and feminine pronouns to avoid being unnecessarily discriminatory. This applies to **singular indefinite pronouns** like *each, either, neither, one, no one, nobody, nothing, anyone, anything, someone, somebody, something, everyone, everybody, everything*:

- Everyone needs to complete *his or her* own essay—don't plagiarise it! (not "his" or "her" alone).
- Each of the workers need to complete a company form to outline *his or her* interests.

By contrast, genderless **plural indefinite pronouns** (*several, few, both, many*) take a plural pronoun:

- Several of the workers in the company filled in *their* form.

Using a pronoun to refer to a pronoun: Sometimes a long sentence can use a pronoun to refer to a previous pronoun (which, in turn, refers to the noun). In this case, the two pronouns have to agree both in number and gender:

- James' parents think his essay is average but *their* attitude might change if *they* spent more time reading it. (Here "they" needs to be plural because "their" is plural)

Modified Indefinite Pronouns: Sometimes indefinite pronouns are modified by **prepositional phrases** ("in/at/by/on/between the ... X". See the helpsheet **Prepositions**).

If the object of the preposition is countable the pronoun is plural; if the object of the prepositional phrase is not countable use a singular pronoun.

- Some of the workers in the company need to own up to *their* responsibilities (here "workers" is countable so the pronoun is plural).
- All of the money needs to be put back in *its* place ("money" is uncountable, so the pronoun is singular).