

Pronoun-Noun Agreement

“Agreement” here does not refer to having similar views with someone else about a topic. It refers to a concept in English grammar.

Nouns are naming words (for things or objects) and is often several words as part of a noun phrase. **Pronouns** represent a noun or noun phrase, they ‘stand in for’ nouns as a way to make writing less repetitive.

A sentence *without* pronouns would be a very odd sentence, for example: *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:

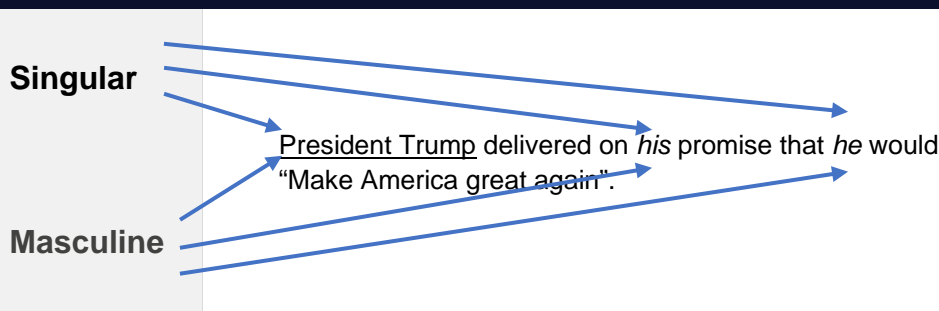
- Relative (who, whom, whose, which, that)
- Possessive (my, your, her, his, their)
- Personal (I, you, he, she, we, they)
- Interrogative (who? what? which?)
- Reflexive (myself, herself, yourself)
- Indefinite (anyone, something, everyone)
- Demonstrative (this, that, these, those)

Agreement

Like the noun-verb agreement rule (refer to 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, but the general format is to keep everything in agreement in terms of **number** and **gender**.

Example: Pronoun-Noun Agreement



Here, the noun is **singular** as it refers to a single identifier (Donald Trump), and as he is a male, the pronoun must be **masculine**. The pronoun and the noun match in number and gender: they agree.

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, like this: James’ Mum and Dad think that *their* son’s essay is excellent (not “his and her”).

In this case, the two people are a pair, not individuals, and therefore the pronoun needs to be 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 in the following example that it sounds 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.
(We are left wondering if the workers raised their concerns separately)

The sentence will usually be clearer and sound more natural 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 discriminatory.

This applies to **singular indefinite pronouns** like *each, either, neither, one, no one, nobody, nothing, anyone, anything, someone, somebody, something, everyone, everybody, and 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. In the following example, “they” is plural because “their” is plural:

- James’ parents think his essay is average but *their* attitude might change if *they* spent more time reading it.

Modified indefinite pronouns

Sometimes indefinite pronouns are modified by **prepositional phrases** like: *in/at/by/on/between the X*. Refer to 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.
(Here, “money” is uncountable, so the pronoun is singular).

Other helpsheets available

- Subject-Verb Agreement
- Prepositions
- Writing in an Academic Style