

# Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

## 1 Here's the Idea

► A pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, gender, and person. An antecedent is the word—a noun or another pronoun—that a pronoun replaces or refers to.

### Agreement in Number

Most of the time, making a pronoun agree in number with its antecedent is easy: a plural antecedent takes a plural pronoun, and a singular antecedent takes a singular pronoun.

Here are three trouble spots that confuse writers and readers.

1. A collective noun, such as *team*, *audience*, *herd*, or *family*, may be referred to by either a singular or a plural pronoun. The collective noun's number is determined by its meaning in the sentence.

Use a singular pronoun to refer to a collective noun whose parts act as a single unit.



The **orchestra** will give **its** final performance tonight.  
(The orchestra is acting as a single unit.)

Use a plural pronoun to refer to a collective noun whose parts act individually.

The **orchestra** have tuned up **their** instruments.  
(The orchestra members are acting individually.)

2. A plural pronoun is used to refer to nouns or pronouns joined by *and*.

**Marla and Denise** played **their** trumpets **together**.

3. A pronoun that refers to nouns or pronouns joined by *or* or *nor* should agree with the noun or pronoun nearest to it.

Neither **the conductor** nor **the musicians** have taken **their** places on stage.

PLURAL PRONOUN

When **they** learned about the unusual prize.

winning the All-County Jazz Band Contest. The **band** were thrilled

first CD this week. The recording session was the prize for

The **Bristol High School jazz Band** finished recording **its**

### STUDENT MODEL

Using the correct pronoun when a collective noun is the antecedent will give your readers information about whether the group is behaving as one unit or as individuals.

## 2 Why It Matters in Writing

**Everyone has his or her favorite recordings.**

The pronouns one, everyone, and everybody are third person and singular. They are referred to by he, him, his, she, her, and hers.

**All students should bring your favorite CD to class.**

The person of a pronoun must match the person of its antecedent.

### Agreement in Person

**All the musicians played their solos.**

If using his or her sounds awkward, try making both the pronoun and its antecedent plural.

**Each musician played his or her solo.**

When the antecedent of a singular pronoun could be either feminine or masculine, you can use the phrase his or her.

Pronoun Gender	Feminine	Masculine	Neuter
she, her, hers	he, him, his	it, its	

The gender of a pronoun must be the same as the gender of its antecedent. The chart below shows pronouns by gender.

### Agreement in Gender

(The personal pronoun agrees with the indefinite pronoun.)  
**CORRECT:** **One of the musicians played her trumpet off key.**  
 (The personal pronoun agrees with the noun, not the indefinite pronoun.)  
**INCORRECT:** **One of the musicians played their trumpet off key.**  
 (The indefinite pronoun agrees with the antecedent. Make sure the personal pronoun agrees with the indefinite pronoun, not with a noun.)  
 One or more nouns may come between a personal pronoun and its indefinite pronoun antecedent.

**Everyone brought his or her clarinet.**

The phrase **his or her** is considered a singular personal pronoun.

SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS → SINGULAR PERSONAL PRONOUNS

**Each of the instruments has its own special sound.**

Use a singular personal pronoun to refer to a singular indefinite pronoun.

**Singular Indefinite Pronouns**

Singular Indefinite Pronouns	Plural Singular or Plural	Plural Singular
anybody	everybody	all
anyone	anybody	both
anything	anything	few
another	either	many
each	neither	several
either	no one	more
each	nobody	most
either	nothing	none
each	no one	some
either	nothing	somebody
anybody	anybody	everyone
anyone	anybody	somebody
anything	anything	something

Making sure that a personal pronoun agrees in number with an indefinite pronoun can be difficult. This is true because the number of the indefinite pronoun is not always obvious. Refer to the chart below when you are trying to determine the number of an indefinite pronoun.

An indefinite pronoun may be the antecedent of a personal pronoun.

**① Here's the Idea****Indefinite Pronouns as Antecedents**

## Plural Indefinite Pronouns

Use a plural pronoun to refer to a plural indefinite pronoun.

 **Both** of the pianists played **their** own compositions.  
 ↗ PLURAL INDEFINITE PRONOUN      ↗ PLURAL PERSONAL PRONOUN

**Few** of us brought **our** sheet music.

## Singular or Plural Indefinite Pronouns

Some indefinite pronouns can be singular or plural. Use the meaning of the sentence to determine whether a personal pronoun that refers to an indefinite pronoun should be singular or plural.

If the indefinite pronoun refers to a portion of a whole, use a singular personal pronoun.

**Some** of the music has lost **its** appeal.

If the indefinite pronoun refers to members of a group, use a plural personal pronoun.

**Some** of the musicians play **their** instruments.



Indefinite pronouns that end in one, body, or thing are always singular.

## 2 Why It Matters in Writing

If the personal pronouns and indefinite-pronoun antecedents in your sentences don't agree, your writing will be very confusing for readers.

### STUDENT MODEL

Each of the instruments of the modern orchestra has **its** own particular history.

The violin is related to two three-stringed instruments, the rebec and the Polish fiddle, played in the 1500s. Both of these had **its** limitations.

