

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns. Words like *he, she, they, it, their, anybody, everything* are pronouns.

Antecedents are the words that pronouns take the place of. (The prefix *ante-* means “before”—we need to know the noun before we replace it with a pronoun.)

Here are some examples:

Jackie told us what she thought about the government.

In this sentence, the pronoun *she* refers to the antecedent *Jackie*.

Teachers believe they have all the answers.

In this sentence, the pronoun *they* refers to the antecedent *teachers*.

Pronouns and antecedents must **agree**; that is, **a singular pronoun must refer to a singular antecedent, and a plural pronoun must refer to a plural antecedent.**

In the two example sentences above, there are no pronoun-antecedent errors: in the first sentence, *Jackie* and *she* are both singular, and in the second sentence, *teachers* and *they* are both plural.

In some sentences, however, it is easy to make a **pronoun-antecedent error**:

A child should always listen to their parents.

In this sentence, the pronoun *their* is plural, but the antecedent *child* is singular.

There are three ways to fix such a pronoun-antecedent error.

1. Correct it by making both pronoun and antecedent singular:

A child should always listen to his or her parents.

2. Correct it by making both pronoun and antecedent plural.

Children should always listen to their parents.

3. Correct it with a rewrite that has no pronoun-antecedent construction:

Children should always listen to parents.

Parents are a good source of wisdom for a child.

Here's another example:

Pronoun-antecedent error:

The problem with an underachiever is that they never reach their full potential.

1. Correct it by making pronouns and antecedent singular

The problem with an underachiever is that he or she never reaches his or her full potential.

(Note: This is grammatically correct but stylistically awkward.)

2. Correct it by making pronouns and antecedent plural:

The problem with underachievers is that they never reach their full potential.

3. Correct it with a rewrite that has no pronoun-antecedent construction:

The problem with underachievers is unfulfilled potential.