



## Help With: Pronouns and Referent Confusion

In many languages pronouns can be omitted as the context makes the meaning clear. In others particle endings or conjugations help indicate who is doing the action. Because of the way English works, you be very specific about the subject of the sentence.

Pronouns replace nouns, and they are only used when the reader knows which noun is meant; that noun is called the *referent*. A careless writer can easily confuse the reader if the connection between the pronoun and the referent is not clear.

No: *If your pet won't eat its dinner, put it in the refrigerator.*

What are you putting in the refrigerator? What seems obvious to you might confuse the reader. Here are some common error patterns with pronoun references.

- Multiple referents. Make sure that the reader knows who *he* or *she* refer to.

No: *When Hamlet attacks Polonius, he is full of anger but he isn't sure what to do with his body.*

Like our pet statement, there is nothing in the sentence telling us who the '*he*'s refer to. The best solution here is to use names and write shorter sentences.

Yes: *When Hamlet kills Polonius he is full of anger. However, Hamlet isn't sure what to do with Polonius' body.*

- Mistakes can also happen with a dependent clause.

No: *Because of his new glasses, Fred noticed the man right away.* (who has the glasses?)

Yes: *Because Fred was wearing new glasses, he recognized the man right away.*

- Make sure the numbering agrees.

No: *There is a coffee cup on the table. However, they're chipped.* (What is chipped? There are no plural nouns.)

Yes: *There are some coffee cups on the table. However, they're chipped.*

No: *If any student is looking for their cell phone, I have it here.* (*student* is singular and *their* isn't; use *his* or *her* or rephrase.)

Yes: *If anyone is looking for a missing cell phone, I have it here.*

- When starting a new paragraphs, it's a good idea to restate any pronouns so that the referents are clear. This is also important in case you move paragraphs around later in editing and forget that you've left an orphan pronoun. Say we're writing a new paragraph:

No: *It was invented in 1877. Several attempts were made to work out the acoustic problems.*

Yes: *The gramophone was invented in 1877. Several attempts were made to work out the acoustic problems.*