

## Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

**Agreement** is a common term in grammar that you may have heard before (as in “subject-verb agreement”). It simply means that the elements of a sentence must **agree** in form, depending on their relationship to each other. One of the most common (and important) types of agreement in English is the agreement between pronouns and their antecedents. But before we discuss that, let’s define those two terms.

A **pronoun** is a word that substitutes for a noun. It doesn’t change the meaning or identity of that noun—it just renames it. For example, I could write, **Dr. Green is a professor.** Or, I could write, “**He is a professor,**” in which case I have used the pronoun “he” to substitute for the noun “Dr. Green.” I haven’t changed the meaning or identity of “Dr. Green”—I’ve just come up with a different name for him.

An **antecedent**, then, is the noun being renamed by the pronoun—“Dr. Green” in the above example.

Now, in English grammar, pronouns and their antecedents must agree in three ways: number, person, and gender.

### Agreement in Number

First, pronouns and antecedents must agree in **number**—that is, whether they are singular (just one) or plural (more than one). Take a look at this sentence:

**The woman worked on (her/their) car.**

Which pronoun do we want in the blank? Well, in this case, our antecedent is “woman,” and since there’s only one woman, it’s singular. That means we want to use the singular pronoun, which is “her.”

But what about this: **The two sisters worked on (her/their) car.**

This time, we have a plural antecedent being replaced by the pronoun (there is more than one sister). Therefore, we want the plural pronoun, which is “their.”

### Agreement in Person

In grammar, **person** refers to the point of view we’re using, and there are three that you need to know:

**First person:** Points to the self, using words such as I, me, my (singular) or we, us, our (plural)

**Second person:** Points to someone else, using words such as you, your, yours (singular and plural)

**Third person:** Points to some third party, using words such as he, her, it (singular), they, them, their (plural), or just a noun

Pronouns and antecedents must agree in person. Look at this sentence:

**I love (my/your/his) job.**

Which pronoun do we use? To figure it out, ask yourself, “Which noun in the sentence am I trying to replace with a pronoun?” Here, it’s “I” (which, funnily enough, is itself a pronoun—pronouns can rename other pronouns!). Now, since “I” is in the first person, I want to choose the first person pronoun, “my.”

Here’s a slightly trickier example:

**My aunt loves (my/your/her) job.**

To figure out which pronoun to use, we need to determine what person our antecedent is in. At first, it may look like the first person since I use “my,” but take a closer look: the antecedent being replaced by the pronoun is actually “aunt,” which is in the third person. Therefore, I should choose the third person pronoun, “her.”

## Agreement in Gender

Finally, pronouns and antecedents must agree in gender. Unlike many languages, English does not usually change the way nouns are formed based on gender—except for pronouns.

Masculine pronouns: he, him, his

Feminine pronouns: she, her, hers

Gender-neutral pronouns: it, its, they, them, theirs

Let's look at an example:

**My father grows (his/her/its) potatoes.**

To fill in the blank, we determine the gender of our antecedent. Since “father” is male, we opt for the masculine pronoun, “his.”

Another example:

**I love books and read (him/her/them) often.**

It may be trickier to find the antecedent here. Ask yourself, “Which noun am I trying to rename?” In this case, it’s “books.” Since “books” is ungendered, we’ll choose the gender-neutral pronoun, “them.” Notice that we have also had to make sure to use the plural “them” instead of “it” since our antecedent is plural—agreement in number. You will often have to manage multiple types of agreement at the same time like this!

## A Note on the Third Person Singular

One quirk about English is that it does not have gender-neutral pronouns for the third person besides “it” and “its.” This results in a problem when we have a singular antecedent that might identify as male or female. Look at this sentence:

**A student should bring \_\_ book to class.**

What pronoun should go in the blank? Our antecedent, “student,” is singular, which would lead us to narrow it down to “his,” “her,” or “its.” However, “its” doesn’t work because the “student” may identify as male or female. And if we use either “his” or “her,” we are assuming any possible “student” to be either male or female, which might also result in exclusion. We could use “his or her,” but that could start to get wordy if we need to use it too many times, and it still excludes individuals who do not use those pronouns. What do we do?

In a case like this, it has become acceptable (in most contexts) to simply use a third person plural pronoun, such as “they,” “their,” or “them.” Example: **A student should bring their book to class.**

One last note: When speaking or writing about a certain individual, do not assume that they must use certain pronouns based on their name, their occupation, the way they look, or any other characteristics. Get clarity on the person’s pronouns so that you are communicating inclusively (see our resource on **Writing Inclusively** for more on this).

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

<https://cottey.edu/campus-community/kolderie-center/learning-center/writing-center/>