PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Basic Rules

- A **pronoun** takes the place of a specific **noun.**
- Examples of pronouns include *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, us, them, hers, his, who, whom, whose,* etc.
- The original noun that the pronoun replaces is called the **antecedent**.
- Pronouns must have clear antecedents.
- Pronouns help with the flow of your writing by pointing to something or someone (the original noun or antecedent) already mentioned or named.
- Pronouns make writing concise by eliminating the need to repeat the antecedent.
  Note: Sometimes it is necessary to repeat the antecedent to make the meaning clear.
- Like nouns, pronouns function as subjects or objects in sentences.
- Pronouns change form according to
    - whether they are feminine or masculine.
    - whether they are singular or plural.
    - how they function in the sentence (subject, object, or possessive).

THE PRONOUN AND ITS ANTECEDENT MUST AGREE IN GENDER, NUMBER AND FORM/CASE.

Agreement in Gender

If the antecedent is feminine, the pronoun must be feminine; if the antecedent is masculine, the pronoun must be masculine.
e.g., When <u>Natasha</u> met *Boris*, <u>she</u> gave *him* a gift.

Situations often arise in which the gender of the antecedent is unclear. When this happens, use the singular "they" or one of its variant forms (e.g., their) to avoid making gender-based assumptions.
e.g., A <u>student</u> left <u>their</u> homework on the table.

When the gender of the antecedent in unclear, **do not** use "he/she" or "he or she" instead of the singular "they." Using he/she or him/her implies that gender is binary and can be offensive to those who do not identify with these binary gender constructs. If you do not like using the singular "they," rewrite your sentence to avoid the use of pronouns.

Agreement in Number

If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular; if the antecedent is plural, the pronoun must be plural.
e.g., <u>Harry</u> wanted to see the movie, but <u>he</u> stayed home instead.
    <u>Harry</u>: masculine, singular; <u>he</u>: masculine, singular.

e.g., A student must study hard if they want to succeed. > Correct
  student: singular, gender unknown; they: singular, gender unknown.

e.g., Students must study hard if they want to succeed. > Correct
  students: plural, gender unknown; they: plural, gender unknown

Both of the above examples are correct because "they" can be plural or singular, but it should act as a singular word ONLY when the gender of the antecedent is unknown or does not fit the he/she binary.

Agreement in Form/Case
- The **form/case** of the **pronoun** must reflect how it **functions** in the sentence.
- If the pronoun acts as the **subject,** it takes the **nominative form/case.**
- If the pronoun acts as the **object**, it takes the **objective form/case.**
- If the pronoun reflects **ownership**, it takes the **possessive form/case.**

PRONOUN FORMS AND CASES

	Nominative Form	Objective Form	Possessive Form
Singular	I	Me	My, mine
	You	You	Your, yours
	She, he, it, they	Her, him, it, them	Hers, his, its, their(s)
Plural	We	Us	Our, ours
	You	You	Your, yours
	They	Them	Their, theirs

Nominative forms: I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they
- Use the **nominative** form if the pronoun **functions** as the **subject** of the sentence/clause.
- Use the **nominative** form when the pronoun follows a *to be* verb.
  - e.g., John always thinks before he speaks.   (*John* = subject: nominative form, *he*)
      He and I went shopping. (*He and I* = subject: nominative form)
      The Nobel Prize winner was she. (nominative form follows *is*, a *to be* verb)

Objective forms: me, you, him, her, it, us, you, them
- Use the **objective** form if the pronoun is a direct or indirect **object**.
  - e.g., The doctor spoke with my husband and me. (object: objective form, *me*)
      When Boris met Natasha, he gave her a gift. (object: objective form, *her)*
      A neighbor helped us. (object: objective form, *us)*

Possessive forms: my, mine, your, yours, his, her, hers, its, our, ours, your, yours, their, theirs
- Use the **possessive** form to indicate ownership.
     e.g., The <u>workers</u> forgot <u>their</u> lunches.
          <u>Jane</u> needed a calculator to do <u>her</u> homework.
          During the storm, the <u>house</u> lost <u>its</u> roof tiles.

NOTE:
Do not confuse *its*, the possessive form of *it*, with *it's*, the contraction for "it is" (See Plurals and Possessives).
Do not confuse *their*, the possessive form of *they*, with *there*, which indicates direction or *they're*, the contraction for "they are."

AVOID AMBIGUOUS AND IMPLIED ANTECEDENTS

- **Clarify ambiguous references** by revising the sentence. Often a pronoun does not provide enough clarity, especially if two or three subjects are involved.
     e.g., Abbott told Costello that *he* won the prize.
          This is ambiguous: *he* can refer to either man. To clarify, rewrite the sentence by inserting a name or using a direct quote.
     e.g., Abbott told Costello that he, Abbott, won the prize.
          Abbott told Costello, "I won the prize."

- **The antecedent cannot be implied: the antecedent must be present.**
     e.g., As an MSU <u>student</u>, <u>it</u> struck me that there is not enough parking on campus.
          >Incorrect: *It* cannot refer to *student*, so there is no antecedent for *it*.
           As an MSU <u>student</u>, <u>I</u> am struck by the fact that there is not enough parking on campus.
          > <u>Correct:</u> *I* refers to *student.*

- **Make sure the pronoun refers to specific people or items.**
     It, *this*, and *that* should not be used to refer to a broad idea or an entire preceding sentence. Instead, use a noun or phrase to express the broad idea.

MORE TRICKY SITUATIONS

Collective nouns as antecedents
- Any **group that functions as a unit**, such as *committee, jury, crowd, corporation*, is singular; use the singular pronoun, *it*.
     e.g., The <u>jury</u> reached <u>its</u> decision. > <u>Correct</u>

The jury reached <u>their</u> decision.> <u>Incorrect</u>
The <u>committee</u> published <u>its</u> agenda for the upcoming retreat. > <u>Correct</u>
The <u>committee</u> published <u>their</u> agenda for the upcoming retreat. > <u>Incorrect</u>
<u>Xenia Corp</u>. made a billion in profits last year. <u>It</u> increased profits by 25% over last year. > <u>Correct</u>
<u>Xenia Corp.</u> made a billion in profits last year. <u>They</u> increased profits by 25% over last year. > <u>Incorrect</u>

Comparisons: *than*, *as*
- **Use the correct form/case** of pronoun when comparing persons or items.

  e.g., Jack is taller than <u>I</u> [am]. > <u>Correct</u>
    Jack is taller than *me* [am]. > <u>Incorrect</u>
    We valued no other employee more than [we valued] <u>her</u>. > <u>Correct</u>
    We valued no other employee more than [we valued] *she.* > <u>Incorrect</u>
  o **How to troubleshoot**: In your mind, fill in the rest of the sentence to double check the form of the pronoun.

    e.g., She cooks better than he [cooks]. <u>Not</u>: She cooks better than him [cooks].
        I am a better cook than she [is]. <u>Not</u>: I am a better cook than her [is].

Compound antecedents
- If there are two nouns, one singular and the other plural, in an either-or situation, the pronoun agrees with the noun nearer to it in the sentence.

  e.g., Neither the <u>squirrel</u> **nor** the <u>*birds*</u> found <u>*their*</u> way to the bin of seed.

NOTE: *Computer grammar checks do not indicate ambiguous or incorrect pronoun references.*