

FROM THE LEGAL WRITING CLINIC
WRITING TIP OF THE WEEK

PRONOUN AGREEMENT



A pronoun must agree with the noun it replaces (the “antecedent”) in number, gender, and person. Errors often occur with agreement in number. To avoid these errors, use a singular pronoun when referring to a singular antecedent and a plural pronoun when referring to a plural antecedent.

- ***Correct:*** The police read Jack Rayburn his rights.
- ***Correct:*** The police read Jack and Sue Rayburn their rights.

The same rule applies when the pronoun replaces a generic noun.

- ***Incorrect:*** The police must read the defendant their rights.
- ***Correct:*** The police must read the defendant his or her rights.
- ***Correct:*** The police must read defendants their rights.

Collective nouns, such as court, jury, or team, are singular (unless referring to the members of the court, jury, or team), so they take singular pronouns.

- ***Incorrect:*** After the court heard the testimony, they dismissed the case.
- ***Correct:*** After the court heard the testimony, it dismissed the case.

Indefinite pronouns, such as everybody, someone, or no one, usually take singular pronouns.

- ***Incorrect:*** Anyone would know that they should not drive while intoxicated.
- ***Correct:*** Anyone would know that he or she should not drive while intoxicated.

For more information, see Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, Just Writing 189-94 (3d ed. 2009) and Laurel Currie Oates & Anne Enquist, The Legal Writing Handbook 631-34 (5th ed. 2010).