

The Antecedent

Recognize an *antecedent* when you see one.

The English language includes pronouns, such as **she**, **it**, or **they**. Pronouns are generic words that have little meaning on their own. If you hear a friend say, "**She** is beautiful," you know your friend is referring to a singular, feminine being or object, but with just the pronoun **she**, you don't know if the discussion concerns a woman, a cheetah, or an automobile. You cannot picture the **she** until you know the *antecedent*, which is the word that the pronoun refers to or replaces.

Often, an antecedent is the word, phrase, or clause that you replace with one of these third-person personal pronouns:

Third-Person Personal Pronouns

he, him, his, himself
she, her, hers, herself
it, its, itself
they, them, their, theirs, themselves

Here are some examples:

Adeline bit **her** lip.

Adeline = antecedent; **her** = personal pronoun.

Our carnivorous **friends** will not attend the picnic because **they** despise tofu hotdogs and black bean burgers.

Friends = antecedent; **they** = personal pronoun.

When **Kris** sprained his ankle, Coach Ames replaced **him** with Jasper, a much slower runner.

Kris = antecedent; **him** = personal pronoun.

Eating with your mouth closed has several benefits. Most importantly, **it** keeps people from turning away in disgust.

Eating with your mouth closed = phrase as antecedent; **it** = personal pronoun.

Karline hopes **that her roommates remember to walk the new puppy**. **It** will mean less urine to mop up when she gets home.

That her roommates remember to walk the new puppy = clause as antecedent; **it** = personal pronoun.

Other times, the antecedent might be the word, phrase, or clause that a demonstrative pronoun replaces.

Demonstrative Pronouns

this, that, these, those

Check out the examples below:

Jackson rides his *skateboard* to work. Now *this* is an eco-friendly mode of transportation!

Skateboard = antecedent; *this* = demonstrative pronoun.

You need to work on *throwing large, unwieldy objects* and *catching heavy things*. *Those* are the skills you must acquire to be a successful chainsaw juggler.

Throwing large, unwieldy objects, catching heavy things = phrases as antecedents; *those* = demonstrative pronoun.

Francine prays *that the neighbors will keep their barking dog inside*. *That* will allow her to get a good night's sleep.

That the neighbors will keep their barking dog inside = clause as antecedent; *that* [the second one] = demonstrative pronoun.

And sometimes the antecedent is the point of reference for a relative pronoun.

Relative Pronouns

who, whom, whose, that, which

Read these examples:

Principal Meyers, whose nose hair curled outside his nostrils, delivered the morning announcements.

Principal Meyers = antecedent; *whose* = relative pronoun.

The *dish that* contains the leftover squid eyeball stew cannot go in the microwave.

Dish = antecedent; *that* = relative pronoun.

Eating ice cream for dinner, which might not be nutritionally smart, is what Teresa wanted after her long day of waitressing.

Eating ice cream for dinner = antecedent; *which* = relative pronoun.

Realize that some antecedents can make pronoun agreement tricky.

Usually, maintaining agreement between antecedents and pronouns is easy. A singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun, like this:

The **cat** yowled **its** happiness for tuna.

Cat = singular antecedent; **its** = singular pronoun.

And a plural antecedent requires a plural pronoun, like this:

The **cats** yowled **their** happiness for tuna.

Cats = plural antecedent; **their** = plural pronoun.

Sometimes, however, establishing agreement can be tricky. Consider the situations below.

Each and Every

When you join two or more singular nouns with **and**, you create a *plural* antecedent:

The beetle **and** baby snake were thankful **they** escaped the lawnmower blade.

Beetle + snake = plural antecedent; **they** = plural pronoun.

If, however, you include **each** or **every** in front, the antecedent becomes *singular* and will thus require a singular pronoun:

Each beetle **and** baby snake was thankful **it** escaped the lawnmower blade.

Each beetle + baby snake = *singular* antecedent; **it** = singular pronoun.

No matter how many nouns you include, if you have **each** or **every** in front, the antecedent is singular and needs a singular pronoun for agreement:

Each beetle, baby snake, worm, centipede, lizard, grasshopper, **and** toad was thankful **it** escaped the lawnmower blade.

Each beetle + baby snake + worm + centipede + lizard + grasshopper + toad
= singular antecedent; **it** = singular pronoun.

Correlative Conjunctions

When you use correlative conjunctions like **either ... or**, **neither ... nor**, or **not only ... but also**, only the second antecedent counts for agreement.

If, for example, the second antecedent is plural, then the pronoun that follows must be plural:

Not only Freddy the nose picker but also grateful **shoppers** replenished **their** supply of tissues during the drugstore sale.

But if the second antecedent is singular, then you need a singular pronoun to maintain agreement:

Not only grateful shoppers but also ***Freddy the nose picker*** replenished ***his*** supply of tissues during the drugstore sale.

Singular Indefinite Pronouns

Singular indefinite pronouns are often antecedents. Logic might indicate that the indefinite pronoun is plural—when we say ***everyone***, for example, we mean more than one person—but with this group, you must use a singular pronoun for agreement:

Singular Indefinite Pronouns
each, either, neither
anybody, anyone, anything
everybody, everyone, everything
nobody, no one, nothing
somebody, someone, something

Read these examples:

Neither of Darren's girlfriends knows ***she*** has competition.

After the long hike in the cold mountains, ***everybody*** needs to replenish ***her*** fluids with a steaming bowl of squid eyeball stew.

The lack of air conditioning made ***everyone's*** shirt stick to ***his*** skin.

Collective Nouns

Class, family, jury, and team are examples of collective nouns. This type of noun names groups composed of two or more members. As we all know, sometimes a group acts in unison, as one unit, with every member doing the same thing at the same time. Other times, the members of the group have their own agendas and are pursuing their individual goals.

When a collective noun is an antecedent, the behavior of its members determines whether you need a singular or plural pronoun.

If all of the members are doing the same thing at the same time, then the collective noun is singular and requires a singular pronoun for agreement:

The Larsen ***family*** does ***its*** shopping every Saturday.

In the quiet auditorium, the ***class*** took ***its*** chemistry final.

The ***team*** roared ***its*** displeasure when the opposition scored another touchdown.

If, however, the members of the collective noun are acting individually, you indicate that change by using a plural pronoun:

In the produce section, the Larsen *family* began arguing about the vegetables *they* would prefer for dinner.

After the long and difficult exam, the *class* returned home, some to pack for winter break, some to study for *their* Thursday exams.

During the off season, the *team* spend *their* afternoons as *they* please, happy to escape the demands of the coaches.

Schools, Businesses, and Organizations

Many people might attend a school, work for a business, or volunteer at an organization, but when the name of that school, business, or organization is the antecedent, you must ignore—for the purpose of agreement—all of the people involved and use a singular pronoun. Study these examples:

When *Weaver High School* won the regional football championship on a technicality, we sneaked onto campus the next evening and cut all four legs off *its* tiger mascot.

Save room for dessert, for *Tito's Taco Palace* offers *its* diners fried ice cream with habanero jelly.

PencilGang International met *its* fundraising goal last year, so free pencils will be distributed to needy writers worldwide.



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