

VI. PRONOUN AGREEMENT

PRONOUN/ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

We replace specific nouns with pronouns to avoid repetition. Without pronouns, some of our sentences might look like this:

When I had lunch with Roger, Roger told me about Roger's geology class and where Roger's geology class was going on Roger's geology class' field trip.

Using pronouns, we make the sentence less wordy but maintain its clarity:

When I had lunch with Roger *he* told me about *his* geology class and where *it* was going on *its* field trip.

The more specific noun (or noun phrase) that a pronoun replaces is called the *antecedent*. In the sentence above, for instance, the antecedent of the pronoun *he* is *Roger*, and the antecedent of the pronoun *his* is *Roger's*.

As a subject must agree with its verb, a pronoun must agree with its antecedent. In informal speech a sentence like the following is acceptable:

When a photographer shoots a portrait session, they must try to make the subject appear natural.

But in formal writing, the sentence is incorrect, because *photographer* is singular and *they* is plural. Traditionally, when a singular pronoun is called for and the sex of the person referred to is not known, we have used *he*, *him*, or *his*.

When a photographer shoots a portrait session, *he* must try to make the subject appear natural.

But the language is changing in this area; many feel that the automatic use of *he* excludes women, that the sentence above, for example, might suggest that all photographers are male.

We have other options to make our pronouns agree. We can include both sexes:

When a photographer shoots a portrait session, *he or she* must try to make *his or her* subject appear natural, so that *he or she* can be assured of *his or her* client's satisfaction.

But many readers also find this method wordy. One other option, when it makes sense in the context of our writing, is to make the pronoun and its antecedent plural:

When photographers shoot portrait sessions, they must try to make the subjects appear natural.

Exercise 1

Change the following sentences so that the pronouns agree.

1. A good many people have a 9 to 5 job and work very hard at them.
2. If a person is going to commit a crime, they should be prepared to face the consequences.
3. I enjoy playing many sports, but I also like watching it on television.
4. Even though the average student tries to use their time wisely, they often fall prey to the many distractions of college life.
5. Each of my brothers has their own car.
6. Someone called late last night, but they hung up when I answered the phone.
7. Most of the time when a customer doesn't try a dress on first, they will only have to return it later.

SHIFT IN PERSON

Pronouns can be divided into three groups:

1. The *first person* is who is *speaking*:

I/me we/us

2. The *second person* is who is being *spoken to*:

you

3. The *third person* is who is being *spoken about*:

she/her he/him one they/them

Now look at the following example:

When *one* is tired and under stress, *your* productivity declines.

Though in the example above the pronouns may both be singular, *one* and *your* don't refer to the same "person." The sentence can be corrected in any of the following ways:

When *you* are tired and under stress, *your* productivity declines.

When *one* is tired and under stress, *his* or *her* productivity declines.

When *people* are tired and under stress, *their* productivity declines.

- * NOTE: In writing, we usually avoid "you," using it only when we are actually writing directly to the reader as an individual. If you mean "many people" or "most people" or even "everybody," use third person pronouns. If you really mean "I," say "I."

Exercise 2

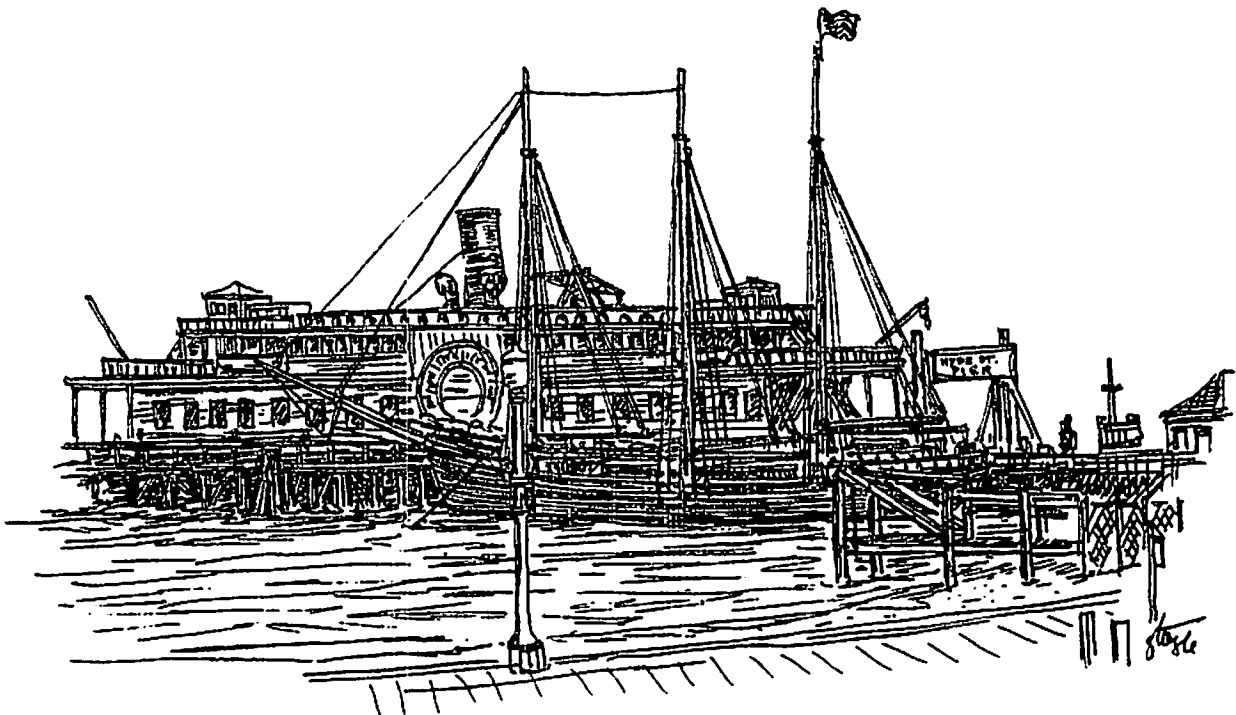
Correct the following sentences so that pronouns agree.

1. When one is very young, you often don't understand the pressures that parents face.
2. I liked the movie because it kept you on the edge of your seat.
3. Professor Clark told us that we don't have to answer the last essay question unless you want to skip one of the first four.
4. Either one can seek learning experiences or they can live for their possessions.
5. When you go shopping, one should have a specific list.

Exercise 3

Rewrite the following sentences so that the reference of the underlined pronoun is clear.

1. Roger removed the engine from his car before he sold it.
2. Before she was chosen as president, Martha and Yvette had been close friends.
3. When I pulled the car into the gas station, it was empty.
4. Ed told his father that he would have to pay for the ticket.
5. Cynthia has decided to go on a trip to the Sierra. She has never been backpacking but intends to buy one.



AQUATIC PARK—FOOT OF HYDE STREET