Week #7 Grammar – Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement

A pronoun should always refer clearly to its antecedent. A pronoun and its antecedent must always agree in number, person, and gender.

Antecedent – the word a pronoun stands for in a sentence – the noun to which the pronoun refers.

Example: The man claimed that he was the owner of the rare vase.

(antecedent) (pronoun)

General Rules

1. Avoid the ambiguous reference, which occurs when a pronoun refers to either of two antecedents.

Ambiguous: Dora wrote to Anna while she was away.
Clear: While Dora was away, she wrote to Anna.
Clear: While Anna was away, Dora wrote to her.

2. Avoid the general reference, which occurs when a pronoun refers to a general idea rather than a specific noun. The pronouns which, this, that, and it are used in a general way.

General: Even students with season tickets had to pay admission to the post-season games. We thought it wasn’t fair.
Clear: Even students with season tickets had to pay admission to the post-season games. We thought the fee was unfair.

3. Avoid the weak reference, which occurs when a pronoun refers to an antecedent that has not been expressed.

Weak: In my Chinese cooking class, I made one.
Clear: In my Chinese cooking class, I made an egg roll.

4. Avoid the indefinite reference, which occurs when a pronoun, such as they or you, refers to no particular person or thing.

Indefinite: In Houston they have a chili festival every year.
Clear: Houston has a chili festival every year.

5. The words each, either, neither, one, everyone, everybody, no one, nobody, anyone, anybody, someone, and somebody are referred to by a singular pronoun – he, him, his, she, her, hers, it, its.

6. The use of a phrase after the antecedent does not change the number of the antecedent.

Each of the women had removed her shoes.
If anyone calls, tell him I’ll be back later.
7. When the antecedent may be either masculine or feminine, use the masculine pronoun, which is standard usage in formal writing. Avoid the awkward use of two pronouns.

If anyone calls, tell him I’ll be back later.

Practice: Circle the correct pronoun in each of the sentences below.

1. Another of the women qualified for (his, her, their) license today.
2. Transistors and vacuum tubes differed greatly in (its, their) size and power consumption.
3. If Angela or her coworkers find an error, (she, they) will want to correct it.
4. Everybody wants to know what (his, her, their) present will be.
5. Members of the jury will be able to discuss (his, her, their) views of the evidence when they enter the jury room.
6. Everyone expected that when Tyler and his son arrived, (he, they) would bring (his, her, their) tools.
7. Rachel and her brother found (his, her, their) seats in the new Cowboys’ stadium.
8. The family is looking for a way to express (its, their) appreciation.
9. Neither Valerie nor Paige could get (her, their) car unstuck after the snow in the parking lot thawed and refroze.
10. Either Dana or one of the other waiters will find you an empty table in (his, her, their) section.

More Practice: Rewrite each sentence so that each pronoun has a clear antecedent. Do not just replace pronouns with nouns. Make every effort to have pronoun/antecedent agreement.

1. I take many pictures with my camera and consider it an enjoyable hobby.
2. A student should always do their best work when the teacher assigns an essay.
3. Fay was arguing with Jane, and she looked unhappy.
4. The Gilbert School District has a serious problem on their agenda.
5. When the glass bowl landed on the floor, it shattered.
6. Each member of the jury has voiced their opinion.
7. Anyone who wants to join the women’s choir should check their schedule.
8. Phoebe liked the Led Zeppelin CD but was disappointed that it didn’t include her favorite one.
9. My grandparents walk five miles a day. It is one of the best forms of exercise.

10. The loyal forces fought the guerillas until they were almost entirely destroyed.

11. The radiator was leaking badly; it ran all over the garage floor.

12. She had written a great deal of poetry during her life, but she had never had any of them published.

13. The jewelry sales clerk tried to make us believe they were genuine.

14. We unpacked our dishes from the boxes and then returned them to the moving company.

15. In Washington they are skeptical about the idea of the new healthcare program.