**Pronouns and
Pronoun-Antecedent
Agreement**

*Basic Principle: A pronoun usually refers to something earlier in the text (its****antecedent****) and must agree in number — singular/plural — with the thing to which it refers.*

The indefinite pronouns *anyone, anybody, everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, no one*, and *nobody* are always singular. This is sometimes perplexing to writers who feel that *everyone* and *everybody* (especially) are referring to more than one person. The same is true of *either* and *neither*, which are always singular even though they seem to be referring to two things.

The need for pronoun-antecedent agreement can create *gender* problems. If one were to write, for instance, "A student must see his counselor before the end of the semester," when there are female students about, nothing but grief will follow. One can pluralize, in this situation, to avoid the problem:

* Students must see their counselor before the end of the semester.
Or, one could say
* A student must see his or her counselor. . . .

Too many *his*'s and *her*'s eventually become annoying, however, and the reader becomes more aware of the writer trying to be conscious of good form than he or she is of the matter at hand.

Trying to conform to the above rule (#2) can lead to a great deal of nonsense. It is widely regarded as being correct (or correct enough), at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to *say*

* Somebody has left **their** bag on the floor.

but many people would object its being *written* that way because *somebody* is singular and *their* is plural. There is a great deal to be said, however, for using the word *their* as the gender-non-specific, singular pronoun. In fact, it's been said already, and you can read all about it at the **[The University of Texas](http://www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html)**, where a web-site has been dedicated to the use of *their* in this way in the writings of Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, and other literary greats. At least it's nice to know you're not alone! Another site dedicated to the "gender-free pronoun" is at [**Gender-Neutral Pronoun Frequently Asked Questions**](http://www.aetherlumina.com/gnp/index.html).

Remember that when we compound a pronoun with something else, we don't want to change its form. Following this rule carefully often creates something that "doesn't sound good." You would write, "This money is for me," so when someone else becomes involved, don't write, "This money is for Fred and I." Try these:

* This money is for him and me.
* This arrangement is between Fred and him.

Those are both good sentences.

One of the most frequently asked questions about grammar is about choosing between the various forms of the pronoun *who*: who, whose, whom, whoever, whomever. The number (singular or plural) of the pronoun (and its accompanying verbs) is determined by what the pronoun refers to; it can refer to a singular person or a group of people:

* The person who hit my car should have to pay to fix the damages.
* The people who have been standing in line the longest should get in first.

It might be useful to compare the forms of *who* to the forms of the pronouns *he* and *they*. Their forms are similar:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | **Subject Form** | **Possessive Form** | **Object Form** |
| **Singular** | hewho | hiswhose | himwhom |
| **Plural** | theywho | theirwhose | themwhom |

To choose correctly among the forms of *who*, re-phrase the sentence so you choose between *he* and *him*. If you want *him*, write *whom*; if you want *he*, write *who*.

* **Who** do you think is responsible? (Do you think *he* is responsible?)
* **Whom** shall we ask to the party? (Shall we ask *him* to the party?)
* Give the box to **whomever** you please. (Give the box to *him*.)
* Give the box to **whoever** seems to want it most. (*He* seems to want it most. [And then the clause "whoever seems to want it most" is the object of the preposition "to."])
* **Whoever** shows up first will win the prize. (*He* shows up first.)