ENGLISH, LITERACY, AND COMMUNICATION

Pronoun-antecedent agreement

Difficulty level: Advanced

English, Literacy, and Communication

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Overview of the concept

This is how you keep your writing clear about who you mean, like making sure they in a sentence points back to the right group of people. An email that says the team will meet and they should bring their notes only works if they clearly means the team. A report about a company that switches between it and they leaves the reader guessing who did what. Matching each pronoun to the right noun is a small habit that stops a lot of confusion.



Rule

A pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent, the noun it refers to.

A singular antecedent takes a singular pronoun. A plural antecedent takes a plural pronoun.

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Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q Fix: Each student must bring their own book. (strict singular agreement)

SOLUTION

Find the antecedent: 'Each student' is singular.

Since the antecedent is singular, the pronoun has to be singular too: 'his or her'.

Fixed: Each student must bring his or her own book.

EXAMPLE 2

Q Fix: The dogs wagged its tail.

SOLUTION

Find the antecedent: 'dogs' is plural.

Since the antecedent is plural, the pronoun has to be plural too: 'their'.

Fixed: The dogs wagged their tails.

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Practice questions

1 Fix: The team won its game. (already correct? answer Yes or fix)

- A Yes, already correct
- B The team won their game.
- C The team won his game.
- D The team won her game.

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2 Fix: Sara lost her book. (already correct? answer Yes or fix)

- A Sara lost their book.
- B Yes, already correct
- C Sara lost his book.
- D Sara lost its book.

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3 Fix: The boys did his homework.

A The boys did his or her homework.

B The boys did their homework.

C The boys did her homework.

D The boys did its homework.

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4 Fix: Each girl brought their lunch. (strict singular agreement)

A Each girl brought our lunch.

B Each girl brought his lunch.

C Each girl brought her lunch.

D Each girl brought its lunch.

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5 Fix: The dog wagged their tail.

- **A** The dog wagged its tail.
- **B** The dog wagged his or her tail.
- **C** The dog wagged his tail.
- **D** The dog wagged her tail.

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6 Fix: Maria and Ana shared her notes. (two people)

- **A** Maria and Ana shared their notes.
- **B** Maria and Ana shared his or her notes.
- **C** Maria and Ana shared his notes.
- **D** Maria and Ana shared its notes.

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7 Fix: The company changed their name. (company as one unit)

- A The company changed his or her name.
- B The company changed his name.
- C The company changed its name.
- D The company changed her name.

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8 Fix: Nobody left their bag. (strict singular agreement)

- A Nobody left his bag.
- B Nobody left our bag.
- C Nobody left his or her bag.
- D Nobody left its bag.

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9 Fix: Every student finished his or her test. (already correct? answer Yes or fix)

- A Every student finished their test.
- B Every student finished his test.
- C Every student finished its test.
- D Yes, already correct

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10 Fix: The birds built their nests.

- A The birds built his nests.
- B The birds built their nests.
- C The birds built her nests.
- D The birds built its nests.

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ANSWER KEY

1. Yes, already correct

2. Yes, already correct

3. The boys did their homework.

4. Each girl brought her lunch.

5. The dog wagged its tail.

6. Maria and Ana shared their notes.

7. The company changed its name.

8. Nobody left his or her bag.

9. Yes, already correct

10. The birds built their nests.

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