

# Pronoun Reference

Teaching

Avoid these pronoun reference problems.

**Indefinite reference** is a problem that occurs when the pronoun *it*, *you*, or *they* does not clearly refer to a specific antecedent. Eliminate this problem by rewriting the sentences in which the pronouns appear.

**Awkward** In the rule book, they say that coaching a partner is forbidden.

**Revised** The rule book states that coaching a partner is forbidden.

A **general reference** problem occurs when the pronoun *it*, *this*, *that*, *which*, or *such* is used to refer to a general idea rather than to a specific noun antecedent. Correct the problem by adding a clear antecedent or by rewriting the sentence without the pronoun.

**Awkward** You have been giving your partner hints, which gives you an unfair advantage.

**Revised** Your habit of giving your partner hints has given you an unfair advantage.

An **ambiguous reference** problem occurs whenever more than one word might be a pronoun's antecedent. Eliminate the problem by rewriting the sentence to clarify what the pronoun refers to.

**Awkward** Those players are not playing fair; she keeps giving her hints.

**Revised** Those players are not playing fair; Trish keeps giving Ann hints.

## Identifying Clear Pronoun References

In each group of sentences below, one sentence has an indefinite, general, or ambiguous pronoun reference. The other is correct. Underline the one that is correct.

- Gerald told Hal that the handwriting looked like his.  
Gerald told Hal that the handwriting looked like Hal's.
- They said on the television news that a thunderstorm is coming.  
The TV weatherperson said that a thunderstorm is coming.
- Because this summer has been dry, growing watermelons has been tricky.  
This has been a dry summer, which has made growing watermelons tricky.
- On the score, it has the trombones resting for four measures.  
The score instructs the trombones to rest for four measures.
- Like most of his friends, Sasha looks forward to pizza day at the cafeteria.  
Sasha looks forward to pizza day at the cafeteria. That is how most of his friends feel, too.
- The photograph and the article appeared in today's paper; I know that because I saw it briefly.  
When I looked at today's paper briefly, I saw both the photograph and the article.
- The ad states that milk provides essential nutrients such as calcium.  
In the ad, they say that milk provides essential nutrients such as calcium.
- If they want us to recycle, they should provide us with clear rules.  
If the sanitation department wants us to recycle, officials should provide us with clear rules.

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## More Practice

### Avoiding Indefinite, General, and Ambiguous References

Rewrite the following sentences to correct indefinite, general, and ambiguous pronoun references. More than one interpretation may be possible. Add any words that are needed to make the meaning clear.

1. Using bones they have found, they are rebuilding the dinosaur.  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. A finch egg is the size of a marble, and it weighs one gram.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. In the preface it explains how they used to live on homesteads in the 1800s.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. We removed the pictures from the walls and cleaned them thoroughly.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Jessica took the turtle out of the terrarium and washed it.  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. In the 19th century, you had to work 12-hour days.  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Brian understood the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* after he read it.  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. In some parts of the West, you get very little rainfall.  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Bill and Karen unloaded the bags from the shopping carts and returned them.  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. It has been raining off and on for three days. This has made Gretchen appreciate sunny weather.  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Mike told Paul that he was the next player to bat.  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. In the program, they list the graduates in alphabetical order.  
\_\_\_\_\_

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## Application

### A. Eliminating Pronoun Reference Problem

Revise the sentences below to correct all indefinite, general, or ambiguous pronoun reference problems. More than one interpretation may be possible.

1. At the meeting, they introduced the teacher advisors for the club.  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. The wizard Merlin told the young King Arthur that the sword was his.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Michelle counts on her friends to take good notes, which is a good idea until your friends are absent one day.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Lenny and his brother played catch while he ate a sandwich.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. In this magazine, you usually have a variety of articles by well-known authors.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### B. Using Clear Pronoun References

In the following paragraph, find five sentences with indefinite, general, or ambiguous pronoun references. Revise the sentences on the lines below.

(1) They often use Harlem as an example of urban poverty. (2) This section of New York City, however, once enjoyed better days. (3) African-American literature and culture flourished during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. (4) Musicians from New Orleans brought jazz to Harlem. (5) Intellectuals flocked to Harlem circles because you had a stimulating atmosphere. (6) Writers and activists such as W. E. B. DuBois argued for full and immediate racial equality. (7) Poets such as Langston Hughes found it meaningful to write about black urban life. (8) As white readers sampled the work of Hughes, Claude McKay, and others, their reputations spread. (9) Its cultural contributions endured long after the Great Depression had caused economic decline in Harlem.

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