

INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

THE WRITING CENTER

Strategies for Using Pronouns Effectively

Because pronouns replace specific nouns and noun phrases with less specific terms, they can often be a source of confusion in writing. If you are worried that your pronouns might be unclear or confusing, start by circling or labeling all the pronouns you use. Then locate an antecedent for each pronoun.

Sometimes, you will discover that a pronoun does not actually have an antecedent. In other cases, you may find that, though you know what the antecedent is meant to be, another reader would have difficulty determining the antecedent.

- Jane and Julie went to the store to get some ice cream, but she decided she wanted candy instead. (You will probably know whether it was Jane or Julie who wanted ice cream, but your reader will not.)

If you find pronouns without antecedents, **locate the first use of the pronoun and replace it with the noun it is standing in for.** Similarly, if you find a place with an unclear antecedent, reword the sentence or replace a pronoun with a noun.

Circling your pronouns and antecedents can also help you see how much distance there is between the two. If there are too many words between an antecedent and a pronoun, your reader may have trouble recognizing which word a pronoun replaces (particularly if there are a lot of nouns in between the two).

While excessive pronouns or unclear referents can cause confusion, too few pronouns can make writing unnecessarily repetitive and can also introduce confusion into a paragraph. Sometimes, addressing this can be as simple as replacing some of the nouns in a paragraph with pronouns. If a paragraph uses a number of short, informative sentences that follow similar structures, introducing pronouns and relative clauses can often help vary sentence length and improve transitions between sentences.

- John Smith published an article in *The Atlantic* on June 5, 1987. The article was called “What’s so great about cookies?” In the article, it said that cookies were an inferior dessert when compared to cakes or pies. John Smith is a baker and has written several cookbooks, so he should know.

In addition to the unclear referent in the third sentence (as the object of the preposition in, “the article” is not a clear antecedent for the pronoun “it,” which is the subject of the sentence), this paragraph is choppy, repetitive, and lacks sentence variety. There are a variety of ways these sentences could be combined to form one or two longer, more complex sentences:

- In “What’s so great about cookies,” which was published in *The Atlantic* on June 5, 1987, John Smith addresses the pressing issue of dessert hierarchy. Smith, who is a baker and has written several cookbooks, argues that cookies are an inferior dessert when compared to cakes or pies.

