

A Grammar Guide

Agreement - Pronoun/Antecedent:

Use pronouns to avoid repeating nouns:

could talk
Awkward: When Bob got out of the Army, all Bob
been on Bob. about was how hard the Army had

could talk
Better: When Bob got out of the Army, all he
on him. about was how hard it had been

In the second example above, the use of pronouns streamlines the sentence so that its meaning is immediately clear to the reader. However, care must be exercised to ensure that the pronoun refers specifically to the word (antecedent) it is intended to replace. As the following INCORRECT examples illustrate, when the pronoun-antecedent link is unclear, the resulting sentence is confusing:

disagreement over
Awkward: Bob and Tom have an ongoing
how large his fish really was.
(To which antecedent does the pronoun "his" refer?)

so that
Awkward: Sandy studied computer programming
she could get a job as one.
("one".)
(There is no antecedent for the pronoun

interviewing team
Awkward: Not a single member of the
who met with this year's
candidates for entry
level positions had their reports

together in

time for the staff meeting.

been

(The singular antecedent "member" has obscured by intervening phrases. Since the must always agree with the antecedent in the plural "their" should be replaced by a "her" construction.)

pronoun

number,

"his or

word

Awkward: Software houses are churning out new processing programs almost daily, which compete with each other and generate huge revenues.

which

generate huge

and "it"

(Pronouns such as "which," "that," "this," can be used too loosely, creating ambiguous sentences.)

ambiguous

Pronouns must also agree with their antecedents in gender and type. The following CORRECT examples illustrate pronoun/antecedent agreement in gender and type:

a person who likes ice cream

a cow that gives lots of milk

a door that sticks

her work.

Doris always double checks

root nodules.

The plant fixes nitrogen in its

hers for free.

The next woman in line gets

as the Titanic
she did.

A ship that was as well built
should never have sunk, but

Case:

The case of pronouns is vital in linking them correctly to their antecedents. Some pronouns ("I," "he," "she," "we," "they," "who," and "whoever") are subjects. Other pronouns ("me," "him," "her," "us," "them," "whom," and "whomever") are objects. The following CORRECT examples illustrate proper case:

As subject: She and I will volunteer for the program.

As object: The program needs volunteers like her and me.

As subject: We will attend the opening ceremonies.

As object: Please allow us to attend the opening ceremonies.

As subject: Who will give the opening speech?

As object: The speaker is someone to whom we can relate.

As subject: Whoever receives an invitation should attend.

As object: Send an invitation to whomever you choose.

Questions concerning the proper case of pronouns can often be answered by interchanging subjects and objects. In the following examples, the CORRECT pronoun is in parentheses:

and hanged he

The press has already convicted
(him) with their scathing editorials.

(he) do it?"

One editorial asked, "Why did him

whom (who) has

The judge must excuse any juror
read that editorial.

NOTE: Test "who/whom" and "whoever/whomever" constructions

by
complete
subjective
objective

replacing the pronoun in question with "he." If a sentence results ("He has read that editorial.") the pronoun case (who/whoever) is correct. If not, the case (whom/whomever) is the one to use.

Modifiers:

Modifiers must be located where their relationship with the word they are modifying is clear. Misplaced modifiers can be a source of confusion and occasional humor:

the Rocky

Correct: The airplane filled with tourists flew over
Mountains in a snowstorm.

in a

Misplaced: The airplane flew over the Rocky Mountains
snowstorm filled with tourists.

filled

Misplaced: The airplane flew over the Rocky Mountains
with tourists in a snowstorm.

because it

Correct: My Aunt decided to trade in her Mercedes
had rear-end problems.

decided to

Misplaced: Because of rear-end problems, my Aunt
trade in her Mercedes.

Parallel Structure:

Parallel structure means the sentence is consistent in listing items in a series and in balancing ideas. Parallel structure is the most effective way to convey the intended meaning of a sentence to the reader.

and

Parallel: John D. Rockefeller was rich, successful,
highly respected.

because

(The above sentence has parallel structure
all of the items in the series are adjectives.)

and there

him.

Faulty: John D. Rockefeller was rich, successful,
were many people who respected

structure

adjectives,

(The above sentence does not have parallel
because two of the items in the series are
and the third is an independent clause.)

exercised great

political

Parallel: John D. Rockefeller was a man who was
immensely wealthy and who
influence over the economic and
activities of his country.

because the

dependent

(The above sentence has parallel structure
two ideas introduced by the word "who" are
clauses.)

exercised great

political

Faulty: John D. Rockefeller was a man who was
immensely wealthy, and he also
influence over the economic and
activities of his country.

structure

an

(The above sentence does not have parallel
because a dependent clause is paired with
independent clause.)

Sentences:

A complete sentence, when read by itself, will convey the information intended. But a sentence fragment can have no meaning unless it is attached to a complete sentence. Sentence fragments are normally created when either the subject or verb is missing:

Complete: Our profit margin has greatly improved our position.

Fragment: Since we have improved our position.

Fragment: Could have improved our position.

Fragment: Who successfully improved our position.

Fragment: Wanting to improve our position.

Fragment: To improve our position.

Fragment: A company that improves its position.

Voice:

Active voice constructions are clearer than passive voice constructions. Active voice constructions position the subject before, not after, the verb:

Active voice: John kicked the ball.

Passive voice: The ball was kicked by John.

Active voice: The secretary writes the letters.

Passive voice: The letters are written by the secretary.

Active voice: The customer will sign the contract.

Passive voice: The contract will be signed by the customer.