

Vague Pronoun Reference

Pronoun reference is the relation between a pronoun and its antecedent. A pronoun is considered vague or confusing if it does not clearly refer to a specific person or thing in the sentence (the antecedent).

To review, a pronoun is a word used to take the place of a noun and should refer to one unmistakable noun preceding it. This noun is called the pronoun's antecedent (<https://online.jwu.edu/blog/how-clarify-vague-pronoun-reference/>).

Using demonstrative pronouns such as "it" or "these" without a clear antecedent can cause readers to be confused when they read an essay.

1. Avoid ambiguous references of pronouns. Ambiguous reference occurs when a pronoun may refer to two different antecedents.

Confusing: *Mr. Jacobs smiled proudly at Jim as he received the silver trophy.*
Who received the trophy, Mr. Jacobs or Jim?

Clear: *As Jim received the silver trophy, Mr. Jacobs smiled proudly at him.*

2. Avoid general reference of pronouns. The antecedent of a pronoun should be a single word or word group, not a general idea. If pronouns such as *this*, *that*, *it*, and *which* are used in a general way and without a clear antecedent, it can confuse readers.

Confusing: *Ellen was late to work, missed her first appointment, and was reprimanded by her supervisor. This caused her to be disagreeable for the rest of the day.*

What is "this" referring to? Was Ellen disagreeable because she was late, or because she missed her first appointment, or because she was reprimanded by her supervisor? In the second sentence, is the word "her" referring to Ellen's supervisor or Ellen? Who was disagreeable?

Clear: *These events caused Ellen to be disagreeable for the rest of the day.*

3. Avoid implied reference of pronouns.

Confusing: *In Indiana, they grow corn.* Who are *they*?

In this example, the pronoun "they" has no antecedent to which it can refer.

Clear: *In Indiana, the farmers grow corn.*