

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF WRITING

The Sixth Deadly Sin: Pronoun Problems

Pronouns are useful as substitutes for nouns, but a poorly chosen pronoun can obscure the meaning of a sentence. Common pronoun errors include:

UNCLEAR PRONOUN REFERENCE

A pronoun must refer to a specific noun (the antecedent). Ambiguous pronoun reference creates confusing sentences.

Example: Writers should spend time thinking about their arguments to make sure *they* are not superficial. (*Unclear antecedent: who or what are superficial?*)

Example: A key difference between banking crises of today and of yesterday is that *they* have greater global impact. (*Which crises have more impact?*)

If a whiff of ambiguity exists, use a noun: A key difference between banking crises of today and yesterday is that today's crises have greater global impact.

VAGUE SUBJECT PRONOUN

Pronouns such as *it*, *there* and *this* often make weak subjects. Use a pronoun as subject only when its antecedent is crystal clear.

Example: Pope Gregory VII forced Emperor Henry IV to wait three days in the snow at Canossa before granting him an audience. It was a symbolic act. *To what does it refer? Forcing the Emperor to wait? The waiting? The granting of the audience? The audience? The entire sentence?*

AGREEMENT ERROR

A pronoun must agree in gender and number with its antecedent. A common error is the use of the plural pronoun *they* to refer to a singular noun.

Example: In the original state constitution, they allowed polygamy. *They* (plural) refers to *constitution* (singular).

Revised: The original state constitution allowed polygamy.

It is often better to use a plural noun and pronoun than to use a singular noun and pronoun. Note that indefinite pronouns such as *each* and *everyone* are singular.

Examples: Each student must meet *his* or *her* advisor. (*correct but awkward*)
Each student must meet with *their* advisor. (*incorrect: singular noun, plural pronoun*)
Students must meet with *their* advisors. (*correct: plural noun and pronoun*)