

Pronoun Reference and the Problem of "They"

The principle: Pronouns must agree in number (i.e., singular or plural) with the nouns they replace (often called the "referents," or the "antecedents." Pronouns include the words *I, you, he, she, it, us, our, him, her, his, hers, they, their, them, themselves, himself, herself, myself, yourself, ourselves*.

Most common problem: The words *they, their, and them* (all plurals) are frequently used to refer back to singular nouns. Why? Because nearly everyone in the country speaks this way all the time, most likely to avoid the problems of gender bias involved in deciding to use *he* or *she*. Written language, however, is more conservative. Therefore, we must make sure our pronouns agree (singular or plural) with their referents when we write.

Method of Detection and Correction:

1. Go through your paper and underline every single *they, their, them, they're, or themselves*. Draw an arrow to the word each one refers to. If the referent is singular, change it to plural.
2. Doublecheck the whole sentence to make sure you also change any other words, like verbs, as required.

Example of pronouns that don't agree...and need to be revised:

Everyone who likes to ski knows how expensive the hobby can be. They have to get skis, boots, and poles, just to start. A skier's next big expense is their clothes, and of course everybody wants their style to be up-to-date. A ticket is never cheap; some resorts have three-day special passes, but they can run as much as \$100. But once a skier has all this paid for, there still remains one final problem: how will they get to the resort to do their skiing?

NOTE: The following words are singular, and therefore don't agree with *they*:
anybody, anyone, somebody, someone, nobody, no one, everybody, everyone.
 Try changing them to phrases such as *most people, many musicians, no students, etc.*