Help With: Pronouns and Referent Confusion

In many languages, pronouns are sparingly used as the context makes the meaning clear; in others, particle endings or conjugations help indicate who is doing the action. Because of the way the language works, English requires that you be very specific about the subject of the sentence.

Pronouns replace nouns, and they can only be used when the reader knows which noun is meant; that noun is called the referent. A careless writer can easily confuse the reader if the connection between the pronoun and the referent is not clear. Let’s look at a few examples.

- Multiple referents. Make sure that the reader knows who he or she refers to.

  ❌ When Hamlet kills Polonius, he is full of anger but he isn’t sure what to do with his body.

  The referents aren’t clear; who is doing what? There is nothing in the sentence telling us this information. The best solution here is to use names and shorter sentences.

  ✔ When Hamlet kills Polonius, he is full of anger. However, Hamlet isn’t sure what to do with Polonius’ body.

Mistakes can also easily happen with a dependent clause.

  ❌ No: Because of his new glasses, Fred noticed the man right away. (Who has the glasses?)
  ✔ Yes: Because Fred was wearing new glasses, he recognized the man right away.

- Don’t be vague.

  ❌ No: Both Neo and Trinity die. I don’t think they should show so much violence in movies. (Who are they? Neo and Trinity?)
  ✔ Yes: Both Neo and Trinity die. I don’t think filmmakers should show so much violence in movies.

- Make sure the numbering agrees.

  ❌ No: There is a coffee cup on the table. However, they’re chipped. (What is chipped? There are no plural nouns in the sentence.)
  ✔ Yes: There are some coffee cups on the table. However, they’re chipped.

  ❌ No: If any student is looking for their cell phone, I have it here. (student is singular and their isn’t; use his or her or rephrase.
  ✔ Yes: If anyone is looking for a missing cell phone, I have it here.

- When starting a new paragraph, it’s a good idea to restate any pronouns so that the referents are clear.

  This is also important in case you move paragraphs around later in editing.

  ❌ No: It was invented in 1877. Several attempts were made to work out the acoustic problems…
  ✔ Yes: The gramophone was invented in 1877. Several attempts were made to work out the…