

Pronoun References

Marked as “Pro-Ref”

Pronouns, such as *he, she, they, this, that, those, or which*, should clearly refer to specific nouns. Otherwise, you have a faulty pronoun reference that makes a sentence vague, confusing, and grammatically incorrect. In business writing, clear pronoun references are critical.

A pronoun can fall either before or after the noun it refers to. If the pronoun comes afterward, the noun it refers back to is called the “antecedent.” The antecedent of a sentence must be clear for readers to easily comprehend a sentence.

Example of a pronoun coming before the noun

This strategy should work.

[The pronoun *this* refers to the noun *strategy*. If you omit the noun—“This should work”—you have a “naked this,” a syntax you should avoid.]

Example of a pronoun coming after the noun

Jane championed the new strategy. It was bold, innovative, and comprehensive.

[The noun *strategy* is the antecedent to the pronoun *it*.]

Fixing Pronoun Reference Errors

The following examples represent the most common pronoun errors and their solutions:

Ambiguous Pronouns

One error is using a pronoun when antecedent is unclear.

Example:

Jane discussed the new strategy with Jill. **She** decided to proceed as planned.

[Who decided to proceed: Jane or Jill?]

Corrected:

After discussing the new strategy with Jill, Jane decided to proceed as planned.

After Jane discussed the new strategy with her, Jill decided to proceed as planned.

Absent Antecedents

Another pronoun reference error is omitting the antecedent noun.

Example:

Jane says the course is fun to teach because it’s small, and they’re motivated.

[*They* presumably refers to *students*, but the antecedent noun is missing.]

Corrected: Jane says the course is fun to teach, because it's small and the students are motivated.

Loose Antecedents

Finally, a common pronoun reference error is having a pronoun, such as *this*, *that*, *it*, or *which*, refer loosely to the idea(s) just expressed, rather than to a specific noun.

Examples:

The company concealed financial losses. **This** caused investors to dump the stock.

The company concealed financial losses. **That** caused investors to dump the stock.

The company concealed financial losses. **It** caused investors to dump the stock.

[In these sentences, note the lack of a specific antecedent noun for *this*, *that*, or *it*.]

The company concealed financial losses, **which** caused investors to dump the stock.

[Note here that the antecedent for *which* could be either **financial losses**, making the sentence grammatically correct but ambiguous, or the **concealment** of the losses, making the sentence both grammatically incorrect and ambiguous.]

Corrected:

The company concealed financial losses. This accounting fraud caused investors to dump the stock.

[The pronoun *this* clearly refers to the noun *fraud*.]

The company's accounting fraud, which temporarily buoyed the stock price, ultimately caused the stock to crash.

[The pronoun *which* clearly refers back to the noun *fraud*.]

Because the company concealed financial losses, investors dumped the stock.

[This sentence avoids the use of a pronoun altogether.]

<p>For more information on correct Pronoun Reference, see pp. 437 of the <i>Business Writer's Handbook</i>.</p>
--