

# What are pronouns?

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A pronoun takes the place of or substitutes a noun or noun phrase. For example, “He” is a pronoun for “Henry.” Think of it this way: a substitute teacher takes the place of a regular teacher when that teacher is absent. The regular teacher in this case is called the *antecedent* and the sub is considered the *pronoun*. There are subject pronouns, object pronouns, and possessive pronouns, which are called personal pronouns. There are also indefinite pronouns that don’t refer to a particular person or thing. Following are some examples of pronouns.

## Personal Pronouns

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**Subjective pronouns *give* the action.**

- ▲ **He kicks the ball down the street.**
- ▲ **They toasted marshmallows over the fire.**
- ▲ **She desires to be an actress.**

*In the above sentences, “He,” “They,” and “She” serve as the subject in the sentence; they are the ones doing the action.*

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**Objective pronouns *receive* the action.**

- ▲ **You talk to him every year.**
- ▲ **I told her to get the file.**
- ▲ **Mom gave me a car for Christmas.**

*Notice how the italicized word “him” in the first example receives the action “talk.”*

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**Possessive pronouns show possession or ownership.** They agree in both gender and number.

- ▲ **Brandon needs to get his act together.**
- ▲ **Maryanna cannot find her keys.**
- ▲ **The horse slaps its tail.**
- ▲ **I slammed my finger in your door.**

*The pronouns in these sentences tell whose. For example, “his act” tell us that it is Brandon who needs to get it together.*

**Compound subjects –You and I or You and me?** Sometimes you will see compound subjects like “you and I, you and me, or my husband and I” in a sentence. So, which one is it? Here’s a way you can tell. Read the sentence as is with the line through it; then, read the rest of the sentence.

- ▲ ~~My sister and~~ me went to the store. [If I cross out “My sister and,” then I have remaining “Me went to the store.”] Now, that does not sound right. However, look at the following bullet.
- ▲ ~~My sister and~~ I went to the store. Since the second example makes a complete sentence, it is the correct one.

*Let’s look at an example when the compound subject-You and I-comes at the end of the sentence.*

- ▲ Mom gave that car to ~~you and~~ I. [Cross out “you and”: now re-read the sentence, “Mom gave that care to I”] Does that make sense? No, but take a look at the following example.
- ▲ Mom gave that car to ~~you and~~ me. [If you cross out “you and,” what’s left is “Mom gave that car to me,” which makes a complete sentence. The same goes if the compound subject appears in the middle of the sentence.
- ▲ Dad gave ~~you and~~ I permission to go to the movies. “Dad gave I permission” is not correct but “Dad gave me permission” is correct. Therefore, the correct pronoun to use is “you and me.”

*This method works for all compound subjects using pronouns.*

**Whom/Who –**

- ▲ Chelsey is my daughter whom I am very proud. [ When a noun follows the pronoun, use “whom.” ]
- ▲ Chelsey is my daughter who loves me very much.[Notice how the verb “loves” proceeds the pronoun *who*]
- ▲ To whom should I give my thanks?[Use “whom” when in a prepositional phrase]

*In summary, use whom when a noun follows and who when a verb follows, and in the case of a prepositional phrase, always use the pronoun whom.*

**Ambiguity/Unnecessary-**Sometimes, when a pronoun is used, it is unclear as to what that pronoun is referring to, or it is used unnecessarily. Following are some examples of these two cases.


- ▲ **They never give to charity. [Who are they, vampires or someone specific?] It is unclear who “they” are in this sentence.]**
- ▲ **Greedy people never give to charity. [Now, that’s specific.]**

That example shows an ambiguous use of the pronoun “they.” So, now let’s look at some examples of unnecessary use.

- ▲ **In the short story “Crazy Courage, it discusses individuality.**
  - **The short story “Crazy Courage” discusses individuality. [correct]**
- ▲ **The voters, they wanted Mitt Romney to win.**
  - **The voters wanted Mitt Romney to win. [correct] We would not use “they” in this case because, again, it is unclear as to who “they” are.**


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**Their, his/her and its-** A pronoun must coordinate with its antecedent in number-singular/plural- and in gender. For example,

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- ▲ **Macy stubbed her toe on the table. –She stubbed her toe.**

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- ▲ **Jack and Nancy sold their house. –They sold their house.**

However, with some pronouns, gender is **indefinite**.

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- ▲ **A student should talk with his/her professor before missing class.[Since “A student” is singular and neutral in gender, the pronoun taking its place should also be singular and represent both genders.]**

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- ▲ **That crazy cat chases its shadow up and down the hall. [not “it’s either; also, this example shows what to do when gender does not apply.]**

**Reflexive pronouns** – These pronouns refer or “reflect” back to the subject in the sentence. All reflexive pronouns end in “self”--myself, yourself, herself, himself, ourselves, and themselves. Below are some examples of how reflexive pronouns work in a sentence.

▲ **Rahib looks at the mirror every day. – Rahib looks at himself every day.**

▲ **That crazy cat grooms the dog. – That crazy cat grooms itself.**

▲ **You can love them. – You can love yourself.**

Sometimes we want to put emphasis on the pronoun. For example,

▲ **We *Americans* are tired of violence.**

▲ **The President himself will speak at the conference.**

▲ **I myself prefer to drink tea over coffee.**

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**Than she or than her.** In English, we also use pronouns to compare one thing to another. For instance, I am smarter than her. By using a method called “finish the sentence,” it is easy to know which pronoun to use. For example, the previous sentence is saying, “I am smarter than she is.” Therefore, we know that the sentence is incorrect, and the right pronoun to use is she. The next few bullets illustrate this very thing.

▲ My best friend Drucilla dances more gracefully than me/I. Drucilla dances more gracefully **than I dance**. So, “I” is the correct pronoun in this case.

▲ Despite all of the vocal lessons Marisol has taken, Greg is a much better singer than she/her. The sentence is saying: “Greg is a much better singer **than she is.**”

▲ I care more passionately about my job than he/him. If I finish the sentence, it states, “I care more passionately about my job than he does. Therefore, he is the correct pronoun to use.

## Indefinite Pronouns

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Indefinite pronouns are very general, not specifically pertaining to anyone or anything. However, knowing which pronoun to use in a sentence can be confusing because they must agree in number and gender.

**Singular/Indefinite** pronouns take singular verbs and personal pronouns: each, either, neither, both, every (one, thing, body), any (body, one, thing), some (body, one, thing), one, no one, nothing, other, another, little, and much. Here are some examples.

- ▲ **Each** of the children **eats** pizza and **drinks** orange juice for lunch.
- ▲ **Anyone** who talks in class **will have** ***his/her*** name written on the board.
- ▲ **Neither** of those classes **has** ***its*** teacher present.

**Plural/Indefinite** pronouns take plural verbs and personal pronouns: many, others, few, and several.

- ▲ **Many do not like** the idea of limited printing in the Comm. Lab.
- ▲ **A few** of the **students** **have** already turned in **their** homework.
- ▲ **Several** of them **need** help with their writing assignment.

**Singular or Plural-** Some indefinite pronouns can be singular or plural, depending on what that pronouns is referring to: all, any, none, some, more and most.

Following are some instances of this type of pronoun.

- ▲ **Most** of the steak **has** **its** fat trimmed. [Since “steak” is singular, the pronoun “most” is singular in this case.]
- ▲ **All** of the students **will be given** ten minutes to take their quiz. [Since “**All**” is referring to *students*, follow the rules for using plural/indefinite pronouns.]

*For any additional help concerning pronouns, please refer to the Purdue OWL website on grammar or have a one-on-one session with one of Comm Lab’s fabulous tutors.*