

Pronoun Reference

To write clearly and coherently, avoid confusing pronoun reference. A pronoun substitutes for a noun. A pronoun refers backwards to a noun or noun phrases, tying what follows in the sentence to what has gone before. Notice how the use of pronouns can eliminate unnecessary repetition and wordiness.

Wordy: He took a strand of her hair and held the strand of her hair in his hands as if the strand of her hair was the rein to a delicate beast.

Revision: “He took a strand of her hair and held it in his hands as if it was the rein to a delicate beast.” (Notice the pronoun *it* substitutes for the noun phrase *a strand of her hair* and avoids unnecessary and distracting repetition.) [from Louise Erdrich]

When pronoun reference is confusing, however, you force the reader to guess your meaning. Don’t do it! As part of the editing process, locate each pronoun and make sure it refers back to a specific, easily recognizable noun or noun phrase.

Example: “There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is, how far is it from midtown and how late is it open?” (Here the *it* refers clearly back to the noun phrase *unseen world*.) [from Woody Allen]

Example: “O’Higgins had his suit stolen while he was still in it.” (Here the *it* refers clearly back to the noun *suit*.) [from Woody Allen]

EDITING TIPS FOR CLEAR PRONOUN REFERENCE

1. **Make sure each pronoun refers back to a specific noun or noun phrase. The pronoun should not refer back to the idea of a sentence or paragraph.** For clarity, avoid using the pronouns THIS, THAT WHICH, and IT when followed by verbs.

Confusing! Marco Polo never discussed the ceremony of tea drinking in his 13th century account of his travels to China. THIS has led many historians to doubt whether he ever left his hometown in Italy. (What noun or noun phrase does *this* substitute for?)

Clear! Marco Polo never discussed the ceremony of tea drinking in his 13th century account of his travels to China. This odd omission has led many historians to doubt whether he ever left his hometown in Italy. (Notice how adding *omission* immediately after the pronoun *this* specifies why historians doubt the authenticity of Marco Polo’s China travels.)

Confusing! This semester, personal computers can be connected to the library system which will help students conduct research at home. (What noun or noun phrase does *which* substitute for? Does *which* substitute for personal computers? Library systems?)

Clear! Connecting personal computers to the library system this semester will help students conduct research at home. (Notice how rewriting the sentence eliminates the need for *which* and makes the sentence more concise.)

2. Make sure the pronoun refers back to a noun or noun phrase, not a possessive.

Confusing! Duong Thu Huong's novels are banned by the Vietnamese government, even though she is one of her country's most popular writers. (What noun does *she* substitute for? Pronouns can only replace nouns. But, in the example, *Duong Thu Huong's* is not a noun. Instead it is a possessive used to modify the noun *novel*.)

Clear! Even though Duong Thu Huong is one of her country's most popular writers, her novels are banned by the Vietnamese government.

3. Make sure the pronoun refers back to a previously stated noun. Especially avoid using the pronouns *they* or *you* unless used to refer back to people.

Confusing! They say that three out of four people prefer walking on their feet. Who does *they* refer to?)

Clear! Scientists say that three out of four people prefer walking on their feet.

4. Make sure the pronoun refers back to only one noun or noun phrase.

Confusing! “The peasants seized power by force and quickly changed all locks on the palace doors so the nobles could not get back in. Then they had a large party and gorged themselves! When the nobles finally recaptured the palace they were forced to clean up and found many stains and cigarette burns.” (Who cleaned up the mess? The nobles? The peasants?) [from *Without Feathers* by Woody Allen]

Clear! The peasants seized power by force and quickly changed all locks on the palace doors so the nobles could not get back in. Then the peasants had a large party and gorged themselves! When the nobles finally recaptured the palace they forced the peasants to clean up the many stains and cigarette burns.