

Correct: Since my **father** is watching *Miami Vice*, **he** won't be available for an hour. (masculine)
OR
Since my **sister** is watching *Miami Vice*, **she** won't be available for an hour. (feminine)

PRACTICE: Circle the incorrect pronouns in the following paragraph.

Not every student who enters college is sure they know what they want to major in. Many can remember that growing up they wanted to be firemen or teachers. But a person's childhood fantasies don't always become their choices later on. For example, while many boys dream in her youth of fighting fires, you don't always grow up to do that. As adults, they may desire a more secure and safer job in business. Deciding a major isn't easy, and sometimes a student will put them off too long. My advice to you is to pick your major as soon as possible so that they can plan their future.

Fill in the correct pronouns using the three agreement rules and the chart above.

1. The boys said that _____ were ready to play basketball.
2. The monkeys were selfish and refused to share _____ bananas.
3. Jeff was determined to stop _____ sister from eating more cake.
4. June doesn't know when _____ will ever see _____ dog again.

Problems to Avoid

- **Avoid pronoun ambiguity.** Sometimes we use pronouns which have no clear antecedent. In other words, the pronoun could be referring to either of two possible antecedents, and this can confuse the reader. Consider this sentence:

Ann told her friend that her cat sheds too much hair.

Is Ann talking about getting rid of her own cat or her friend's cat?? The two underlined pronouns do not have a clear antecedent (Ann or her friend). The meaning of the sentence (and what we think about Ann's manners!) depends on *clear* pronoun reference. The sentence is clear if written like this:

Ann said to her friend, "My cat sheds too much hair."

PRACTICE: In each sentence below, please underline the two possible antecedents and circle the ambiguous pronoun.

1. Young children do not know how to play with mechanic toys sometimes, so they should be taken good care of.
2. Julie always argues with her mother. She seems to be very easily annoyed.
3. Our puppy dog loves playing with the neighbor's tomcat. He is so funny.
4. The Smiths met John and Mary on a cruise in the Caribbean. They decided to invite them for a drink in the top-deck bar.

- **Avoid sexist language.** The practice of using the terms "man" and "he" when referring to both men and women is outdated and considered sexist by many people. Writers should avoid making judgments of gender when making general statements:

*A doctor should listen to **his** patients. (sexist)*

*A doctor should listen to **his or her** patients. (not sexist)*

Sometimes, overusing “his or her” and “he or she” can make writing awkward. It is usually better to try to use a plural antecedent instead of a singular one.

*Doctors should listen to **their** patients.*

This sentence does not use sexist language **and** avoids the use of “his or her.”

PRACTICE: Rewrite the following sentences to avoid sexist language and the use of “his or her” and “he or she.”

1. Without a diploma, a person will struggle to reach his or her potential.

2. I heard that a housekeeper can get paid enough money to support herself.

3. Any child playing in this park needs to be careful; he or she can fall off the slide and get injured.

Other Helpful Pronoun Rules

1. The antecedent is generally never found in a prepositional phrase.

Each of the students read **his/her** paper aloud.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

2. When the antecedent is a subject joined **either-or** or **neither-nor**, use the subject closest to the verb to determine the correct pronoun.

Either Don or **his brothers** will have **their** notes from the class.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Neither the children nor **Mary** has **her** answers ready.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

3. When the antecedent is a compound subject (two nouns joined by a coordinating conjunction, such as **and**, **but**, **yet**,) use a plural pronoun.

Jane and Tom own **their** own home.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Both the **cat and dog** have eaten **their** food.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

When the compound antecedent is joined by **or** and both antecedents are singular, the pronoun is singular.

Either **Bob or Jim** gives **his** speech today.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

When both antecedents are plural, the pronoun is plural.

The **juniors or the seniors** may take **their** tests today.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

When one antecedent is singular and the other is plural, the pronoun agrees with its closest antecedent.

Ms. Hill or the **Mitchells** will give **their** presentation.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Either the soldiers or **the general** will be required to submit **his** resignation.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

5. Phrases such as **one of**, **neither of**, **each of**, and **either of** are singular antecedents and take a singular pronoun. (Notice that **of** actually introduces a prepositional phrase.)

One (of the girls) lost **her** keys.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Everyone (of the kittens) had **its** own distinctive cry.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Neither (of the boys) had on **his** coat or hat.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

6. Phrases such as **both of** and **some of** generally are plural antecedents and require plural pronouns.

Some of the students had lost **their** books.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

Both of the boys had **their** heads shaved.
(antecedent) (pronoun)

MORE PRACTICE

Read the following paragraphs carefully. Circle each pronoun that is underlined, and draw an arrow to the antecedent. If the pronoun is not correct, cross it out and write the correct form directly above it. In some cases the verb form must also be changed.

Writing is a way for a person to develop their vocabulary. Finding new ideas and expressing it in writing will help students in their understanding of the richness and variety of the English language. Writing is also a way for a student to improve themselves intellectually.

The most important way writing is valuable is in the pleasure it provides. When a student writes, they must examine their thoughts and feelings on a topic which provides new insights into his own character.

A teacher should encourage writing in their classes. She should assign topics each week which will challenge students to the utmost of his ability. The class could also use one of their meetings to have students read his essay out loud. In this manner, either the pleasure of writing or the intellectual benefits will exert its influence to make the students avid writers.