Clear Reference

Pronouns and Antecedents

One cause of ambiguity in writing is the use of pronouns without clear antecedents. A pronoun has no definite meaning in itself; its meaning is clear only when the reader knows what word it stands for. This word is called the antecedent of the pronoun. For instance, the pronoun she has no clear meaning in the sentence The nurse told Mary that she had a fever. Although the context suggests that it is Mary who has the fever, we cannot be sure. When we know that she stands for Mary, the pronoun has a definite meaning. We could revise the sentence to read: The nurse said, "Mary, you have a fever" or The nurse said that Mary had a fever.

In the following sentences arrows point from the pronouns to their antecedents.

The Pope asked Michelangelo to do the sculpture, but he refused.

The math teacher gave the students a problem which they couldn't solve.

After trying on the long blue dress, Mary said, "This fits perfectly."

13a. A pronoun must refer clearly to the right antecedent. Avoid ambiguous reference, general reference, and weak reference.

AMBIGUOUS REFERENCE

(1) Avoid ambiguous reference. Such reference occurs when a pronoun refers to two antecedents so that the reader does not know at once which antecedent is meant.

AMBIGUOUS Mrs. Smith smiled at Mrs. Jones when she was awarded the silver cup.

In this sentence we do not know whether Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Jones was awarded the silver cup. We can clarify the sentence by rearranging it.
When Mrs. Smith was awarded the silver cup, she smiled at Mrs. Jones.

The purser explained to the passenger the meaning of the regulation he had just read. [Who read it?]

After reading the regulation, the purser explained its meaning to the passenger.

When the children brought the dusty rugs out to the garden, the maid beat them, [the rugs or the children?]

The maid beat the dusty rugs that the children had brought out to the garden.

As you can see, ambiguous references may be corrected in several ways. The object is always to make your meaning clear.

EXERCISE 1. Find the ambiguous meanings in each of the following sentences. Make the sentence clear by revising it.

EXAMPLE 1. When the airplane struck the hangar, it burst into flames, [airplane or hangar?]
1. When it struck the hangar, the airplane burst into flames.

1. The loyal forces fought the guerrillas until they were almost entirely destroyed.
2. The police officer told the sergeant that he had a button missing on his uniform.
3. The guide explained to the tourist the value of the stone she had found.
4. Marc informed Darrel that his social engagements would be more numerous when he went to college.
5. When Anna brought Lena to the conference, we asked her for her credentials.
6. Since the show was scheduled for the same night as the election, it had to be postponed.
7. The manager told the waiter that he would have to replace all broken dishes.
8. When the ambassador said goodbye to the foreign minister, reporters thought he looked confident.
9. When the truck hit the wall, it was hardly damaged.
10. Before the gate could fit the opening of the fence, it had to be made smaller.

GENERAL REFERENCE

(2) Avoid general reference. General reference occurs when a pronoun refers confusingly to an idea that is vaguely expressed. The antecedent is expressed in terms which are too general to be clear. Pronouns commonly used in this way are which, this, that, and it.

More than twenty percent of those who enter college fail to graduate, which is a shame.

In this sentence the pronoun which refers to the fact that more than twenty percent of those who enter college fail to graduate. Since the pronoun which has no antecedent, the reader is confused. The sentence needs correction:

It is a shame that more than twenty percent of those who enter college fail to graduate.

In the following example, the pronoun this does not have a clear antecedent.

In the fall our school specializes in football, in the winter in basketball, and in the spring in baseball, tennis, and crew. This makes for a balanced athletic program.
CLEAR Emphasizing all these sports makes for a balanced athletic program.

In the next example, the pronoun *it* does not have a clear antecedent. A definite noun makes the meaning clearer.

GENERAL The ancient Romans conquered more of the world than they could reach readily with their troops. The troops themselves were frequently hired from a foreign power. Meanwhile, at home, the existence of slavery made honest labor no longer respectable. Eventually, *it* caused the great Roman Empire to **collapse**.

CLEAR All these conditions eventually caused the great Roman Empire to collapse.

Sometimes general reference can best be corrected by revising the whole sentence.

GENERAL The wind rose, the trees showed the pale undersides of their leaves, dark clouds appeared, and an ominous silver curtain moved in from the distant hills. *This* caused us to finish bringing in the hay as quickly as possible.

CLEAR We brought in the hay as quickly as possible when we noticed how the wind rose, the trees showed the pale undersides of their leaves, dark clouds appeared, and an ominous silver curtain moved in from the distant hills.

**EXERCISE 2.** The following sentences contain examples of the general reference of pronouns. Revise the sentences or replace the unclear pronouns with nouns to make the meaning clear.

1. At the Uffizzi Gallery we saw the famous Botticelli *Primavera*, some Raphaels, a Titian, and a Michelangelo, which made the visit worthwhile.
2. A large number of young people have left Hastings Corners to work in the city, which is unfortunate for this town.
3. The guidance counselor asked me whether I wanted Latin, French, or Spanish, which was difficult to decide.
4. My parents bought a new rug and new curtains, and we hired a man to paint the walls and ceiling. That certainly improved the appearance of the room.
5. After the storm, the trail to the top of the mountain was washed out in some spots and was littered in many places with fallen branches. It made the ascent nerve-wracking.
6. The first part of the test was on chemistry, the second on mathematics, the third on physics. This made it very difficult.
7. Wolf Brothers’ sale included household furniture, men's and women's clothing, automobile accessories, and sports goods. This was sure to bring in many customers.
8. Some of the eyewitnesses described the man as short, others said he was tall, and yet others said he was "about average." It confused the police investigators.
9. The principal said that the play would have to be given in the old auditorium unless by some miracle the new auditorium were to be completed ahead of schedule, which will be a blow to the Maude Adams Drama Club.
10. We walked up a long, dreary road, cut through a thicket of un-pruned trees, and cautiously approached the lonely old house, which made us all tired and depressed.
11. I received a notice that two of my library books were over due, which was a complete surprise.
12. The route to the top of the mountain led over deep chasms and vast sheets of ice. It made the ascent extremely difficult for the exploring party.

**WEAK REFERENCE**

(3) Avoid weak reference. Weak reference occurs when the antecedent has not
been expressed but exists only in the writer's mind.

WEAK Every time a circus came to town, Alice wanted to join them.

In this sentence there is no antecedent for the pronoun them. Them refers to the people with the circuses, but these people are not specifically mentioned in the sentence.

CLEAR Every time a circus came to 'town, Alice wanted to become one of the troupe.

In the following sentence, you will see that there is no clear antecedent for the pronoun these.

WEAK He was a very superstitious person, and one of these was that walking under a ladder would bring bad luck.

In this sentence the antecedent for the pronoun these should be the noun superstitions, but the noun is only implied in the adjective superstitious. The error may be corrected by substituting a noun for the pronoun or rewriting the first part of the sentence.

CLEAR He was a very superstitious person; one of his superstitions was that walking under a ladder would bring bad luck.

BETTER He had many superstitions, one of which was that walking under a ladder would bring bad luck.

WEAK Mother is very much interested in psychiatry, but doesn't believe they know all the answers.

CLEAR Mother is very much interested in psychiatry, but doesn't believe that psychiatrists know all the answers.

Weak reference may be corrected by replacing the weak pronoun with a noun or by giving the pronoun a clear and sensible antecedent.

EXERCISE 3. Correct the weak reference in each of the following sentences.

1. Arthur Conan Doyle began his career as a doctor and it explains his interest in careful observation.
2. The famous author has an enormous library, and she makes them available to her friends.
3. They planned to eat dinner outdoors by candlelight, but a strong wind blew them out.
4. For years after Mark Twain saw the steamboat in Hannibal, Missouri, he wanted to become one of them.
5. Even though it rained on the night of the concert, Ed went because his favorite ones were being played.
6. In Perugia the factory that made the world-famous candy was open, but we didn't buy any of them.
7. Although he is fond of poetry, he has never written one.
8. Tia's uncle has a huge vegetable garden, and he keeps them supplied with fresh vegetables all summer long.
9. In Central City, Colorado, opera is performed in the summer at the Teller Theater, but we did not see any of them.
10. Trout-fishing is not much sport unless you catch one.
INDEFINITE USE OF PRONOUNS

13b. **In formal writing, avoid indefinite use of the pronouns it, they, and you.**

Although the indefinite use of these pronouns in sentences like the following may occur in ordinary conversation, such use is not acceptable in most writing.

**INDEFINITE** On television it said that a new earthquake broke out in Italy.

**BETTER** The television news reported a new earthquake in Italy.

**INDEFINITE** In some histories they refer to the Civil War as the War Between the States.

**BETTER** Some historians refer to the Civil War as the War Between the States.

**INDEFINITE** In some nineteenth-century novels you are always meeting difficult words.

**BETTER** In some nineteenth-century novels, the vocabulary is quite difficult.

In the first of each of these pairs of sentences, the pronouns it, they, you have no clear antecedents.

**>• NOTE** Expressions such as it is snowing, it is too early, and it seems are, of course, entirely correct.

**EXERCISE 4.** The sentences in this exercise contain examples of the indefinite use of it, they, and you. Strengthen the sentences either by replacing the faulty pronoun with a noun, or by revising the entire sentence. Make the meaning unmistakably clear.

1. In *The Diary of Anne Frank* it shows a young girl's courage during two years of hiding.
2. Everyone is excited about graduation because you have worked so hard for it.
3. In South Africa they mine diamonds and sell them to jewelers to be cut.
4. In the sports sections of the daily newspapers, it tells all about the day's events in sports.
5. When grandfather was a child, you were supposed to be absolutely silent at the table.
6. In the Bible it states many truths that have inspired people for centuries.
7. Because modern artists have an idiom of their own, it leads to much misunderstanding.
8. On the book jacket they say that the author herself experienced these thrilling adventures.
9. They had whirled so fast it made them dizzy.
10. In his famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, they say that Michelangelo pictured his enemies among those being punished for their sins.
11. Among the attractions of the tour, they listed free admissions to all places of interest.
12. When Katharine Hepburn's play came to town, they sold out all the tickets far in advance.

**REVIEW EXERCISE.** The sentences in this exercise contain examples of ambiguous, general, weak, and indefinite reference. Correct the errors by using a noun instead of the faulty pronoun or by rephrasing the sentence.

1. For days after he saw a baseball game, Tim wanted to be one.
2. I heard the owl hoot from a tree nearby, but I couldn't see it.
3. Whenever Ruthie went to the library for something interesting to read, she couldn't find one.
4. My mother told my aunt that she did not remember that childhood episode correctly.
5. In small print on the insurance policy, it said that they were not responsible for damage caused by floods.
6. We hiked almost twelve miles to the campsite, erected our tents, arranged our sleeping bags, and then made our supper. This so exhausted us that we immediately went to sleep.
7. Just as they were about to go to bed, Jane told her mother that it was her turn to wind the clock.
8. The motorist passed the red light, for which the police officer gave him a ticket.
9. They worked very hard, but it made them neither rich nor comfortable.
10. Many of our presidents began their political careers as minor public officials, which is a good thing.
11. Jane Austen was one of the greatest English novelists of the nineteenth century, and I like them very much.
13. At the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, they teach foreign languages to the cadets in a few months.
14. The boys toured the North Shore Boat Club but did not go aboard any of them.
15. When we saw the flock of geese, they told us that they had flown all the way from northern Canada.
16. After the barbers had cut the children’s hair, some of them looked as if they had been scalped.
17. The shipwrecked men paddled their raft with their hands day after day, but this brought them no closer to land.
18. When the mirror crashed to the floor, it shattered it into a thousand pieces.
19. Out in the country, far away from city lights, they say you can frequently see the aurora borealis.
20. Our safety man tackled their halfback just as he was about to fall.