PRONOUN REFERENCE **Regis Writing Center**

A pronoun derives its meaning from its antecedent, the noun for which it substitutes. Therefore, a pronoun must refer clearly to its antecedent for the sentence to be clear. Whether a pronoun and its antecedent appear in the same sentence or in different sentences, be sure their relationship is clear. Unclear antecedents can cause the reader to misunderstand the sentence.

Make a pronoun refer clearly to one antecedent. 1.

> Confusing After Margie met her roommate Alice, she was no longer homesick.

The pronoun *she* could refer to either girl.

After *she* met her roommate Alice, Margie was no longer homesick. Clear

2. Place a pronoun close to its antecedent.

> Marty dribbled the ball in the gym that his brother bought. Confusing

This sentence implies that Marty's brother bought the gym.

Clear In the gym Marty dribbled the ball that his brother bought.

3. Avoid confusion with demonstrative pronouns, such as this, that, these, and those, especially when they begin a sentence.

> Confusing Dee had a soda for breakfast and forgot to throw away the can. This made Dee's father so angry that he threw the empty can

> > across the room.

Did Dee's having soda for breakfast or forgetting to throw away the can anger her father?

Clear Dee had a soda for breakfast and forgot to throw away the can. Realizing that Dee had soda for breakfast made her father angry.

Use this, that, which, and it cautiously in referring to whole statements. 4.

The most common implied reference occurs when the pronoun this, that, which, or it refers to a whole idea or situation described in the preceding clause, sentence, or paragraph. Such reference, often called a **broad reference**, is acceptable only when the pronoun refers clearly to the entire preceding clause, sentence, or paragraph.

Confusing The dean talked with the students and reached agreement on a

change in the policy, but *it* took much persuasion.

Did talking with the students or reaching an agreement take much persuasion?

Clear The dean reached agreement on a change in the policy, but

arriving at the agreement took much persuasion.

5. Do not use a pronoun with an unstated antecedent.

Confusing Jon admired the art display, but *they* wouldn't let him touch the

sculptures.

Who is they? There is no antecedent.

Clear Jon admired the art display, but the artists wouldn't let him touch

the sculptures.

6. Do not use a pronoun to refer to a possessive adjective.

Confusing During the professor's office hours, *he* met with students.

The word *professor's* is modifying the noun *hours*.

Clear During *his* office hours, the professor met with students.

7. Avoid the indefinite use of it and they.

Confusing When listening to this CD, *it* reminds me of my family.

Clear When listening to this CD, the lyrics remind me of my family.

Confusing In most blockbuster movies, *they* make me laugh or cry.

Clear Most blockbuster movies make me laugh or cry.

8. Use *you* only to mean "you, the reader."

Confusing After the trip to the zoo, you wrote a two-page essay.

Clear After the trip to the zoo, the student wrote a two-page essay.

9. Be sure the relative pronouns *who*, *which*, and *that* are appropriate for their antecedents.

Who refers to people and animals that have names.

Jeff is the one *who* works in the Writing Center. His cat Precious, *who* is growing old, has difficulty seeing.

Which refers to animals and things.

Regis University, *which* is located in Denver, is a small Jesuit university. The squirrels, which are numerous on campus, are very friendly.

That refers to animals and things and occasionally to persons when they are collective or anonymous.

The goldfish *that* my roommate gave me swam around happily in the bowl.

The basketball team that wins will be in the playoffs.

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