Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

The **Pronouns** “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they” are words that replace **nouns**. **Possessive pronouns** like “his,” “her,” “its,” and “their” not only replace nouns, but also signal possession.

Sarah went to see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because she loves horror movies. (The pronoun “she” replaces the proper noun “Sarah.”)

After seeing the film, Sarah was too afraid to walk to her car alone. (The possessive pronoun “her” replaces the proper noun “Sarah” and signals her ownership of the car.)

Another name for a noun that is replaced by a pronoun is “**antecedent.**” (The prefix *ante-* means “before,” indicating that the **antecedent comes before the pronoun.**)

**Pronouns** and their **antecedents** must agree in number; for example: “**Someone** would go see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because they love horror movies” is incorrect because the antecedent “someone” is singular, while the pronoun “they” is plural. In order to replace “someone,” we need a singular pronoun, “he” or “she.”

**Traps To Watch For**

Pronoun-antecedent agreement becomes complicated when you are dealing with **generic nouns**, **compound antecedents**, **indefinite pronouns**, and **collective nouns**.

**Generic Nouns:** Generic nouns like “swimmer,” “student,” or “politician” refer to a non-specific person within the category of “swimmers,” “students,” and “politicians.” This non-specific person is always singular, since he or she is only one member of the group.

Every zombie must consume human flesh if they he or she wants to live.

Each student should remember to take their his or her garlic and sharpened stake on the camping trip.

**Compound Antecedents:** Compound Antecedents can be joined with “and” or “or/nor.” If they are joined with “and,” they should be treated as plural.

Jason Vorhees and Freddy Krueger teamed up to take revenge on his their foes.

If, on the other hand, they are joined by “or/nor,” they should be treated as singular.

Either Jason Vorhees or Freddy Krueger could have succeeded if he had not underestimated the teenagers.

**Note:** If the two nouns joined by “or/nor” are different in number, the pronoun should agree with the antecedent closest to it.
Neither Godzilla nor the aliens could escape their fate. (Notice that “their” agrees with “aliens” because “aliens” immediately precedes the pronoun.)

Indefinite Pronouns: Indefinite pronouns like “everyone,” “anything,” “anybody,” or “somebody” do not refer to any specific person or thing, so writers treat them as singular.

Everyone who sees The Exorcist is frightened out of their his or her mind.

Collective Nouns: Collective nouns like “committee,” “senate,” or “audience” refer to a group that might act as a single unit. When such a group is acting as a single unit it is referred to in the singular.

The audience screamed in unison as it saw the zombie hordes approaching.

However, when the members of the group act individually, it is appropriate to refer to them in the plural.

The audience clapped their hands when Bruce Willis shot the zombies to pieces.

Practice Exercise

Underline the antecedent in the following examples and circle the correct pronoun for that antecedent.

1. The rabid vampires and hungry werewolf made its/their escape from the hunters.
2. If Hanna or Jane had seen that film she/they would have been terrified.
3. Neither the repentant assassin nor the aliens found its/their way out of the collapsing building.
4. Anybody could use his or her/their holy relic to repel the swarm of undead.
5. Every swimmer at Camp Crystal Lake lost his or her/their life because of Jason Voorhees.
6. When the army got to Washington D.C, it/they enacted a quarantine to prevent the virus from spreading further.
7. The class was armed with sporting goods and firearms it/they had stolen from various stores in the mall.

Where in The Bedford Handbook?

Section 22: Make Pronouns and Antecedents Agree