

## Tip #11. Perplexing Pronouns

Once upon a time there was a writer. He once overheard a writer friend telling someone he was a good writer but he needed to be clear who he was referring to when he used the word 'he'. Confused, he wondered whether he was talking about himself, the friend or someone else?

As the above paragraph demonstrates, pronouns can be devious things, cunning little shapeshifters that quickly adopt the forms of nouns they were not meant to replace. Pronouns such as 'he' 'she' 'we' 'they' and 'it', to name but a few, can quickly put your reader into a tailspin if used loosely. The reason for this is due to the highly ambiguous nature of the English language. Often, even a well-constructed sentence can still be construed in more than one 'correct' way. The immediate temptation is to fall back on grammar rules which should make it perfectly clear to the enlightened which witch is which. However, your average reader is not a grammar nerd and cares little for theoretical conventions. Your average reader wants clarity. Clarity on who is doing what. And it's our job as writers to give them that. If we don't, our readers may pause or retrace their steps to work things out. And when they do, they pull out of the story. The flip side is that we may take things too far in our quest for absolute precision and create dull, monotonous prose with ugly rhythm. Inevitably some ambiguity will usually be present in sentences containing multiple pronouns, however, we should still try and reduce ambiguity as far as possible without being pedantic and boring.

The general rule of thumb is to place your unambiguous antecedent (the noun the pronoun refers to) before and near it's pronoun.

Fairly simple in the case of short sentences.

Eg. 'Jack reached for his gun.' – here *Jack* is the antecedent of *his* and it would be senseless to write 'Jack reached for Jack's gun.'

However, some common pronoun problems crop up when the prose is more complicated.

1. **Lagging antecedents** – here the antecedent is too far removed from its pronoun to be obviously intuitive; the further away it is, the more likely it is that confusion will arise.  
e.g. 'He stared into the headlights. Inside the car Jack would be waiting for him. Jack and who else? Rocco probably. Rocco with his broken nose and scar-slashed jaw, his switchblade flicking in and out, in and out, his knuckle rings glinting in the moonlight. They flashed at him.'

*They???* Even the most astute reader would struggle to realise that *they* refers to *the headlights* that were mentioned way back in the first sentence. Far better to bring the antecedent back into play and place it near it's pronoun. i.e. "*The headlights* seemed to beckon. They flashed at him."

2. **Pronoun jumping the gun** – here the writer places the pronoun *before* the antecedent.  
e.g. 'As the campaign party swirled through the hotel lobby, Beth thought she saw her mother. Joan was always blagging on about how pretentiously her mother dressed and the tall woman in the middle looked like an extra from a Bond movie.'

At first glance you'd be forgiven for thinking the woman Beth saw was her own mother, not Joan's. The antecedent (Joan) has been placed after the pronoun (her). Better to say "...Beth thought she saw Joan's mother. She was always..."

Most mistakes like this one can be corrected by simply switching the antecedent and pronoun around.

3. **Ambiguous antecedent** – here the writer has overloaded the pronoun with more than one antecedent and it's not clear which one the pronoun is referring to.

e.g. 'They wore double breasted tuxedos jackets with black bow ties, black trousers and black Armani shoes. They were covered in filth.'

Here it's not clear what or who is covered in filth. The shoes are closest to the second pronoun '*they*' and so the reader would naturally cling to this image, but it may be incorrect. It could be that *they* were covered in filth *all over* and not just their shoes. If this is the case then 'All of them were covered in filth' would provide a clearer image. If only the shoes were covered in filth then merging the sentences would work better. i.e. '...black Armani shoes covered in filth.'

There's much more to pronouns than what's described above, but these are the hiccups I come across most frequently. At the very least, until you get the hang of them, I would suggest you avoid using too many pronouns in a row without an unambiguous antecedent. Even if it's clear in your mind who's doing what, it may not be clear in your reader's mind. Inserting a name every now and then to re-establish the connection can work wonders for your prose.