



He Said . . . She Said . . . Who Said?



by
Hollie Snider

Ah, pronouns -- those wonderful words that cry out to the writer, “Love me, use me, I’m convenient,” only to whisper, “Identify me.”

Think co-dependent.

Pronouns cannot easily exist alone in this world. Without a noun to depend on, pronouns get questioned and can’t stand up in the spotlight. They become vague.

Okay, so just what is a vague pronoun? Good question, but before I can answer that, we need to know what a pronoun is.

Simply put, a pronoun is a word used in place of a noun. Around one hundred pronouns exist in the English language and all of them are co-dependent little critters extremely resistant to change. Some pronouns are so co-dependent that they even function as adjectives to modify nouns when they can’t replace one. For example, “This book was very good.”

Pronouns have eight classifications. Yep, eight. These are: personal, possessive, intensive and reflexive, relative, interrogative, demonstrative, indefinite and reciprocal.

Personal: these pronouns refer to specific persons or things

singular: I, me, you, she, he, it, her, him

plural: we, us, you, they, them

Possessive: these pronouns specify ownership

singular: my, mine, your, yours, her, hers, his, its

plural: our, ours, your, yours, their, theirs

The pronouns, “my, your, his, her, its, our, their,” function as adjectives to modify nouns as well. For example, “her voice, my car, its leg.”

Intensive and Reflexive: these pronouns emphasize a noun or other pronoun and name a receiver of the action (identical to the doer of the action) respectively.

singular: myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself

plural: ourselves, yourselves, themselves

Intensive pronoun example: “The host himself met us at the door.” Here, “himself” emphasizes “host.” Personally, I try not to use intensive pronouns because they are too repetitive. After all, who else could the host be if not himself? Occasionally, intensive pronouns work for emphasis, but they need to be used sparingly.

Reflexive pronoun example: “Carla stabbed herself.” Here, “herself” identifies Carla as the doer of the action “stabbed” and as the receiver of the action.

Relative: these pronouns are used to introduce subordinate clauses.

who, whom, whose, which, that

For example, “The person who stole my purse was never caught.” Here, “who” is introducing the subordinate clause, “stole my purse” and points back to the noun (or pronoun) the clause modifies. In this case, “person” is being pointed to.

There are some people who will tell you “whichever, whomever, whoever, what, whatever” are also relative pronouns. Don’t buy it. These words do not point back to a noun or pronoun; they only introduce noun clauses.

Interrogative: these pronouns ask questions.

who, whom, whose, which, what

For example, “Whose car is that?”

Demonstrative: these pronouns point to or identify nouns. They can also function as adjectives or as noun equivalents.

this, that, these, those

Adjective example: “This blanket is my favorite.”

Noun equivalent example: “This is my favorite blanket.”

Indefinite: these pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things, as the name implies.

all, another, any, anybody, anyone, anything, both, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, few, many, neither, nobody, none, no one, nothing, one, several, some, somebody, someone, something

Besides being pronouns, most indefinite pronouns also function as noun equivalents. For example, “Something smells good.” Some of these pronouns can function as adjectives as well. For example, “All attendees must check in at the front desk.”

Reciprocal: these pronouns refer to individual parts of a plural antecedent.

each other, one another

I know. I hear you. “What is an antecedent?” you ask. “Antecedent” is just a fancy term for reference, or specific, noun.

So, now that you know what a pronoun is, and the different classifications of them, just what is a vague, or ambiguous, pronoun? These are misused or misplaced personal pronouns. Other pronouns are more resistant to obscurity. Personal pronouns however, seem to leap off the ambiguity cliff often before the writer knows what happened. For example, “He went to the store. There, he bought milk and eggs.” While the sentences are correct structurally, it leaves the reader wondering just who went to the store and who bought the items.

Instead, try writing the sentences as, “Charlie went to the store. There, he bought milk and eggs.” By using the proper noun “Charlie” first, the reader knows who went to the store. By default, the reader also knows who bought the milk and eggs because “he” points back to Charlie although the pronoun is in the next sentence.

Another example, “When Rachel set the ceramic cat on the glass shelf, it broke.” Which broke, the cat or the glass shelf? The reader doesn’t know and can’t figure out the answer from the sentence context. The sentence should be rewritten to read, “The ceramic cat broke when Rachel set it on the glass shelf” or “The glass shelf broke when Rachel set the ceramic cat on it” depending on which the author intended to be broken.

Misplacement and misuse of pronouns can lead to more than a simple question of who -- they can lead to reader confusion. Usually “remote pronoun reference” happens when a pronoun is too far away from its antecedent, or reference noun.

For example, “The court ordered Charlie to pay child support and he refused. About six months later, Marie took Charlie back to court for the unpaid child support. This time the court ordered him to pay the Support and Collections Department, and they would pay Marie. For almost eight months, Marie received regular payments. Then they stopped. Again, he was summoned into court, but he did not respond.”

Here, the first use of “he” is too far away from “Charlie” to be a clear reference. In this paragraph, the reader could figure out to whom “he” refers with a little work, but what if both characters in the paragraph were men? Could the reader still figure out who “he” refers to? Unlikely.

Using personal pronouns to refer to implied antecedents also causes problems. For example, “After braiding

Jenny's blonde hair, I decorated them with ribbons." The reader can figure out "them" refers to the braids, but the only reference noun is the singular "hair" rather than the plural "braids." The writer should replace "them" with "the braids" to avoid the implied antecedent.

So, now that you know what a pronoun is, and what a vague, or ambiguous, pronoun is, how do you avoid them in your writing? With practice and conscientious proofreading. However, don't worry to much about the possibility of a vague pronoun slipping through when writing. Getting the idea down first is always more important. As Louis L'amour once said, "Puke it out and clean it up later." Find the little offenders during the proofreading process, but remember to read like a reader. As the author, you know what you meant. Turn off the writer for this process. If you don't think you can, then read right to left, bottom to top instead. This way, you find the pronoun first and can look for the reference noun it points back to without being distracted by your own glowing prose.

Once you get used to looking for pronouns this way, you'll find yourself finishing your sentences mentally and spotting the pronouns while writing. Don't think proofreading isn't necessary any more. Oftentimes, you'll find the most interesting, uncommon pronoun problems still sneak through after you're used to finding the common.

Be careful not to overuse pronouns either. Boring your reader is just as big a crime as confusing him.

Happy writing!



Hollie Snider is the author of "For the Rank of Master," and a founding member of the Colorado Springs Fiction Writer's Group. Visit her website at www.holliesnider.com.