Pronouns: A Complete and Practical Approach

1. What is a pronoun?

A pronoun is a word that is designed to take the place of a noun.

2. Why are pronouns needed?

Pronouns are needed because our writing would sound very repetitive, stilted, and childish if we had to keep repeating the same noun over and over again, as in this sample:

An important part of our modern world is the car. A car is a necessity. A car is now a very practical thing. When a car is new, the driver must take good care of the car if the car is to last a long time. If a car is given much care and attention, then the car will last many years and the car will provide much pleasure and service.

3. Which words in English are pronouns?

Most pronouns refer to human beings. Here is a listing of most of the pronouns in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I, my, mine, me, myself</td>
<td>we, our, ours, us, ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you, your, yours, yourself</td>
<td>you, your, yours, yourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he, him, his, himself*</td>
<td>they, their, theirs, themselves*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she, her, hers, herself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one, one’s, oneself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it, its, itself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everybody, everyone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somebody, someone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobody, no one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*Himself and theirselves are mistakes. Never say or write them.)

There are also some “special” pronouns in English.

A. who – refers back to any type of human being.
   I have a friend who has traveled around the world.

   that, which – refers to things, ideas, animals, or anything non-human.
   School overcrowding is a problem that has no easy solution.

B. everyone, everybody, no one, nobody, someone, somebody – these are all singular pronouns which require other singular pronouns to refer back to them.
4. How do pronouns work in a sentence?

The _____ noun _______ pronoun ______.  

(They work “backwards,” referring to something that has already been mentioned earlier in the sentence.)

The neighbors down the street said that they might be moving away soon.

5. What are the techniques and skills to be used with pronouns?

a. Think and use LOGIC.
b. Remember (what the original noun was.)
c. Analyze (the original noun as being either singular or plural.)
d. Match the pronoun to the noun (in terms of being singular or plural.)

6. What’s the basic procedure for handling pronouns?

a. Find the noun to which the pronoun would be referring.
b. Determine if this noun is singular or plural.
c. Use either a singular or plural pronoun to refer back to this noun. This is called “agreement” between noun and pronoun. Both the noun and the pronoun are singular, or both are plural. Don’t mix singular with plural.

7. Obvious and easy examples of Step 6: (Easy to see what’s singular and what’s plural)

My son Todd just received his grades in the mail this morning.

All the students should receive their grades by the end of this week.

8. Sometimes, it’s not so easy to see what the pronoun is referring back to.

Each of the five expectant mothers shared their experience with the class.

9. What are the “special rules” to know about pronouns?

A. Phrases like “each of . . .” “one of . . .” “every one of . . .” “each” are all singular and therefore require a singular pronoun to refer back to them. This is always true, especially if they begin a sentence. (The word “each” is singular IF it stands by itself; if it follows the word they, then it takes a plural pronoun. However, try not to link each with they because it is awkward. The word each by itself always means to consider the things you’re talking about one-at-a-time and individually.)
Each student should do his own work. (Correct)

All the students must take the test, and they each should do their own work. (Correct but a little awkward and somewhat illogical.)

B. The phrase “a person” is obviously singular and therefore takes a singular pronoun.

A person should be sure of what he wants (not they want) to do in life.

C. Use who to refer to any type of human being; use which or that for things, animals, ideas, and anything else non-human.

D. Try to avoid using you in a general, all-inclusive sense. Instead of you, use one of the following alternatives:

a. one – One should always take care of one’s health.
b. a person – A person should take care of his health.
c. an individual – An individual should take care of his health.
d. everyone – Everyone should take care of his health.
e. people – People should take care of their health.
f. any specific noun that fits the context – A patient should follow his doctor’s orders.

E. Avoid ambiguous use of pronouns.

- For my tenth birthday, my parents gave me a pair of birds, and loved them very much. (The parents or the birds?)
- Tom met Bill on the street and he gave him $5. (Who gave whom $5?)
- If the children don’t eat all the ice cream bars, put them into the freezer. (Put the children into the freezer????)

Sometimes the way to avoid using ambiguous pronouns is not to use any pronouns at all.

- If the children don’t eat all the ice cream bars, put the rest of the bars into the freezer.

F. Referring to mixed-gender nouns.

How do you properly refer back to singular nouns that could be either male or female like teacher, student, or person?

Every student must bring ??? book to class.

1. Use generic male pronoun (he, his, him, himself)
2. Use his or her/he or she (But – this gets monotonous and distracting very quickly if overused.)
3. Pluralize the noun and use their (All students must bring their . . .) (However, this is neither possible nor desirable all the time!)

In addition, remember these things.

1. Do not use their to refer back to anything or anyone singular. It must be limited to plurals ONLY.
2. Do not use a slash form like he/she. It’s too mechanical.
3. Do not use a combination “made-up” word like s/he or hi/er.

If the sentence refers only to an all-male or an all-female situation, then use the appropriate singular pronoun for that gender.

Each mother of the first grade students gave HER permission for HER child to go on the class field trip.

G. The pronouns who, that, and which can be either singular or plural depending on what they are referring back to.

**Singular:**
A person who is patient and kind would make a good minister.

**Plural:**
People who are good drivers have low insurance rates.

**Singular:**
One problem that is facing mankind is hunger.

**Plural:**
Many problems that are with us today started many years ago.

H. The pronoun you can be either singular OR plural.

As a singular pronoun, the word you refers to one individual person to whom you are speaking or writing.

Mary, I plan to visit you next April. (you = Mary alone)

As a plural pronoun, the word you refers to two or more people to whom you are speaking or writing. For example, a person might write this in a letter to his parents:

Mom and Dad, you are the two greatest parents in the world! (you = both Mom and Dad)

(Either way, the pronoun you is always used with a PLURAL verb only.)
I. Pronouns which imply ownership do NOT take an apostrophe.

Wrong: I am sending you this book because I think it is your’s.
Right: I am sending you this book because I think it is yours.

So, the following pronouns are ALWAYS written without an apostrophe:
yours, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs

Exception: one  Example: One should always take care of one’s health.

J. The phases either . . . or and neither . . . nor require special attention.

1. If both parts of the phrase are singular nouns, then use the appropriate singular pronoun.
   
   Either Tom or Bill is going to donate HIS car to the raffle.

2. If both parts of the phrase are plural nouns, then use their.

   Either the Wilsons or the Murphys sent THEIR regrets about not being able to attend the party.

3. If one part is singular and the other part plural, then use a pronoun which agrees in number with the noun that is CLOSER to the pronoun.

   Either Tom or his brothers sent their tax return in late.

   Either the Smith children or Mary Smith herself sent in her tax return last week.

All of the above rules apply equally to the phrase Neither . . . nor.