

the Writing Centers at Saint Mary's

Winona and Minneapolis

Grammar and Punctuation: Pronoun Reference

To avoid repetition of nouns, writers use pronouns as substitutes for nouns already named. Make sure that pronouns refer to something specific and that what they refer to cannot be misunderstood. Here is an example of unclear pronoun reference:

*Smithall (2011) saw many applications for **this**, but additional research needs to be completed before **it** is clear.*

What exactly do “this” and “it” stand for in the sentence above? We can revise this sentence to use specific nouns:

*Smithall (2011) saw many applications for **this new diabetes drug**, but additional research needs to be completed before the **effects of this drug** are clear.*

Pronoun Tips

#1 Double check your use of “which,” “that,” and “who.” Readers usually associate a pronoun with the noun closest to it.

*The subjects used a food diary app to track their food intake for a month, **which** they were able to download on their phones (Johnson, 2015).*

“Which” is closest to “month” but actually refers back to “app.” Here is one way to revise this sentence:

*The subject used a food diary **app**, **which** they were able to download to their phones, to track their food intake for a month (Johnson, 2015).*

#2 Avoid the Great Unnamed.

***It** was not revealed why only women were included in the trial.*

“It” seems not to refer to anybody or anything in the sentence. (Actually, “it” refers to the entire phrase “why only women were included in the trial,” making its use redundant.) Here is one possible way to revise this sentence:

***The authors** did not reveal why they had included only women in the trial.*

#3 Avoid personal pronouns. Never use “you” in academic writing. Never use “we/us” or “they/them” unless those pro-nouns refer to specific individuals.

***We** know that insulin levels rise when women with insulin resistance consume artificial sweeteners (Johnson, 2015).*

Who is the “we” in the sentence above? The writer is including himself and some unspecified others. Using “we” to mean everyone challenges someone to disagree, thereby creating the opposite effect intended. You can use the pronoun “I” when you describe your methods (or “we” if you have coauthors).