UNCLEAR PRONOUN REFERENCE

“You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal.” - James Baldwin

The grammar outlaw: Unclear Pronoun Reference

The grammar crime: Unclear pronoun reference makes sentences confusing, vague, and difficult to understand.

Question: How do we know if a sentence contains unclear pronoun reference?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlaw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both Isabel and Barbara loved her children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Determine the pronoun and the antecedent.

- A pronoun refers to a noun.
- An antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers.
- In our example, the pronoun is her.
- The antecedent is either Isabel or Barbara.
  * Are they Isabel’s children?
  * Are they Barbara’s children?

From this sentence we cannot tell whose children they are. Because we cannot tell which of the nouns is the antecedent, this sentence is an unclear pronoun reference outlaw.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rehabilitated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both Isabel and Barbara loved Isabel’s children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: How do we catch unclear pronoun reference outlaws?

The clues:

- Find the pronoun and replace it with the antecedent. If the pronoun reference is clear, the sentence should make sense.

1. Pronouns should clearly refer to a specific noun (antecedent). We should know to what each pronoun refers.

A. Eliminate ambiguity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlaw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane told Helen that no one would take her away.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The pronoun: her
• The antecedent: either Jane or Helen  
• unclear pronoun reference

Rehabilitated
“No one will take me away,” Jane told Helen.

B. Do not use “they” when referring to unspecified persons. They” must refer to specific people.

Outlaw
They seriously consider publishing short story collections when some of the stories have already been published in journals.

• The pronoun: they  
• The antecedent (who are “they”?): unknown  
• unclear pronoun reference

Rehabilitated
Publishers seriously consider publishing short story collections when some of the stories have already been published in journals.

C. Only use “it” and “that” when referring to a specific word or phrase.

Outlaw
When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters hide the dead bird, it means they hide the evidence.

• The pronoun: it  
• The antecedent: “it” does not refer to a specific word in the sentence  
• unclear pronoun reference

Rehabilitated
By hiding the dead bird, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters conceal the evidence.

2. Pronoun number

• Pronouns must agree in number with their antecedents.  
• These rules match those of subject-verb agreement.  
• We will review three of the agreement rules.

A. Plural antecedents need plural pronouns, and singular antecedents need singular pronouns

Outlaw
Each person should follow their dreams.
Each person should follow his or her dream.

All people should follow their dreams.

B. With the conjunction “and,” the pronoun becomes plural.

Both David Adams Richards and Margaret Laurence are Canadian; she writes about fictional Canadian towns.

- She: singular pronoun
- David Adams Richards and Margaret Laurence: plural noun

Both David Adams Richards and Margaret Laurence are Canadian; they write about fictional Canadian towns.

C. With the conjunction “or” or “nor,” the pronoun should agree with the closest antecedent.

Either Karen or Len play with their children.

- Their: plural pronoun
- Len: nearest antecedent and singular noun

Either Karen or Len plays with his children.