

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?

Outlaw

Both Isabel and Barbara loved her children.

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.

Rehabilitated

Both Isabel and Barbara loved Isabel’s children.

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.

Outlaw

Jane told Helen that no one would take her away.

- 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.

Rehabilitated

Each person should follow his or her dream.

All people should follow their dreams.

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

Outlaw

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

Rehabilitated

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.

Outlaw

Either Karen or Len play with their children.

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

Rehabilitated

Either Karen or Len plays with his children.