Pronoun Consistency

Pronouns

What is a pronoun?

A pronoun is a word that can be used in place of a noun (a person, place, thing, or concept) or a noun phrase. The word or phrase that the pronoun refers to and replaces is called its antecedent.

Use pronouns to eliminate wordiness.

For example, how can pronouns eliminate repetition in the following passage?

*Jamie enjoys playing the clarinet. Jamie plays the clarinet every evening. Jamie’s brother becomes annoyed when Jamie practices.*

When the passage is revised using pronouns, it conveys the same information much more concisely.

*Jamie enjoys playing the clarinet. She practices it every evening. Her brother becomes annoyed when she practices.*
**Pronoun-antecedent agreement:**

Pronouns must agree in both **number** and **person**.

**Number**
Pronouns may be consistently singular or plural, depending on the number of the antecedent.

**Singular:**
Chris was hungry, so *he* decided to eat.

**Plural:**
Because the *students* were confused, *they* did not complete *their* assignment.

**Person**
Pronouns must be consistent in one person (first, second or third) throughout an entire sentence.

**First person:**
*I wanted to finish my homework.*

**Second person:**
*You should finish your homework.*

**Third person:**
*When one completes the homework, he or she should turn it in.*

**Avoid unclear pronoun references.**

All pronouns should refer specifically to their antecedent. Rename the original noun if a pronoun could refer to more than one antecedent.

**Unclear:**
Although Sean and Paul were supposed to meet for lunch, *he* never showed up.

**Clear:**
Although Sean and Paul were supposed to meet for lunch, *Sean* never showed up.
**Place pronouns and antecedents close together.**

Readers may become confused if there are too many other nouns in between a pronoun and its antecedent.

**Unclear:**
The *announcement* that the employee made and that he released to the public through the national news angered his supervisor, because *it* was a secret.

**Clear:**
Released by the national news to the public, the employee’s *announcement* angered his supervisor, because *it* was a secret.

**Who or whom?**

*Who* and *whom* are two of the trickiest pronouns, but there are ways to discern which one to use.

*Who* and *whoever* are used in the subjective case, meaning they act as the **subject** of a sentence.

**Example:**
*Who* is coming to dinner?

*Whom* is used in the objective case, meaning it acts the **object** in a sentence.

**Example:**
The assignment was given to *whom*?
The food was saved for *whom*?

**Hint:**
To decide between who and whom, rephrase your sentence using *he* or *him*. If you use *he*, the word *who* will be correct. If you use *him*, the word *whom* is correct.

**Example:**
*Who* is building the house? (*Is he* building the house?)
*With whom* did you speak (*Did you speak with him*)?
Indefinite Pronouns:

Don’t be fooled by the following indefinite pronouns. They are all singular: anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, nobody, no one, one, somebody, and someone.

Example:
Everybody should take a break from his or her work once in awhile.

Questions to ask when revising for pronoun clarity:

- Is it absolutely clear which antecedent the pronoun is referencing?
- Do pronouns and antecedents agree in number and person?
- Are the pronoun and its antecedent in close proximity?
- Can I reword the sentence to avoid an unclear reference?

Sources
Fawcett, Susan and Alvin Sandberg) 
Rosen, Leonard J. and Laurence Behrens.