PRONOUN AGREEMENT

A pronoun is a word that can stand in for a noun. There are personal pronouns (I, you, he/she/it, we, you, they), possessive pronouns (my, your, his, her, its, our, your, their), object pronouns (me, you, him, her, it, us, you, them), reflexive pronouns (myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves), relative pronouns (who, which, that), and indefinite pronouns (everybody, each, nobody…). If you use a pronoun to refer to a noun (its antecedent), the pronoun must agree with the antecedent.

Akaky is poor. He must save all year for one overcoat.
His neighbors are strange; they never speak to Akaky.

Beware of vague pronouns!

Watch out for pronouns such as they, this, it, or which if they do not refer to a specific person, group, word, or phrase! Double-check for clarity!

✉ At the office, they make fun of Akaky’s overcoat. (Who are “they”?)
✉ At the office, Akaky’s coworkers make fun of his overcoat.
✉ Akaky works in a government office, and this makes him feel proud. (What does “this” refer to? His working or his working for the government?)
✉ Akaky works in a government office, and his responsible position as a clerk makes him feel proud.
✉ Akaky’s coworkers stare at the rips in his overcoat and laugh about him, which really bothers him. (What precisely bothers Akaky?)
✉ Akaky’s coworkers stare at the rips in his overcoat and laugh about him; their rudeness really bothers him.

• Different subjects joined by “and” (= compound subjects) are plural and thus require plural pronouns.
  Arina and Ivan witnessed Akaky’s birth. I bet they were so excited their eyes bulged!

Exception: When the parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person or thing.
  Cheese and biscuits is his dinner; he loves to eat it every night. (single unit).
  Akaky’s friend and tailor used his best cloth for the new overcoat. (friend and tailor is the same person).

• With compound subjects connected by (either) or or (neither) nor, the pronoun agrees with the part of the subject closer to it.
  The tailor offered neither Akaky nor his other customers that he would make their clothes for free.
Indefinite pronouns like each, any, every, everybody, everyone, anyone, somebody, one (of), no one, nobody take a singular pronoun. All, most, many are plural and take a plural verb. Everybody must bring his or her own cask of Amontillado to the party. Every member of the Italian aristocracy is proud of his wine. All can come to the carnival as long as they bring wine.

Tip: if you use everybody to include both men and women, you must use his or her as the pronoun. To avoid awkwardness, it’s often easier to make the subject plural and use a plural pronoun. All members of Fortunato’s family brought their best wine.

- If you use who, which, or that in relative clauses, remember that who refers to people, which and that to things; that can only be used in essential/restrictive clauses. Cuchesi is a person who cannot tell good wine from bad. Amontillado, which is my favorite wine, must be kept very cold. It took a long time to finish the wall that I built.

- Collective nouns—such as jury, committee, audience, crowd, team, etc.—refer to a group of people (or things). When you use a collective noun to describe a single, impersonal unit, use it in the singular. The family owns a large wine cellar. It approves of fine living in general.

When you want to emphasize a collection of various individuals (and to indicate that they have some emotional involvement with the subject matter), use the plural. The Fortunato family is very supportive. They are always there for each other.

►Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and Edgar Alan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado.”