

9. Pronouns: Agreement and Case

Pronouns are words that replace nouns. Like verbs, pronouns must agree in **number** with their **antecedents** – the nouns they refer to. **Singular nouns take singular pronouns, and plural nouns take plural pronouns.**

Pronouns are necessary because without them, it would be necessary to repeat a noun each time it was referred to. For example, the following passage does not use any pronouns to refer to the noun *tomato*:

The tomato is consumed in many different ways, including raw, as an ingredient in many dishes and sauces, and in drinks. While **the tomato** is botanically a fruit, **the tomato** is considered a vegetable for culinary purposes. **The tomato** is also rich in lycopene, which may have beneficial health effects. **The tomato** belongs to the nightshade family, and **the tomato's** plants typically grow from three to ten feet high and have a weak stem that often sprawls over the ground. **The tomato** is a perennial in **the tomato's** native habitat, and **the tomato** is often grown outdoors in temperate climates.

Notice how incredibly repetitive this version is, and how awkward it is to read. Now we're going to replace all those repetitions of the singular noun *tomato* with the much shorter singular pronoun *it*:

The tomato is consumed in many different ways, including raw, as an ingredient in many dishes and sauces, and in drinks. While **it** is botanically a fruit, **it** is considered a vegetable for culinary purposes. **It** is also rich in lycopene, which may have beneficial health effects. **It** belongs to the nightshade family, and **its** plants typically grow from three to ten feet high and have a weak stem that often sprawls over the ground. **It** is a perennial in **its** native habitat, and **it** is often grown outdoors in temperate climates.

Notice how much smoother and easier to read this version is.

Here, the antecedent and the pronoun **agree** because *the tomato* is a singular noun, and *it* is a singular pronoun.

The pronoun *it* is also correct because it is used **consistently**: the same singular pronoun is always used to refer to the same singular noun. But what if we were to do this?

The tomato is consumed in many different ways, including raw, as an ingredient in many dishes and sauces, and in drinks. While **it** is botanically a fruit, **it** is considered a vegetable for culinary purposes. **They are** also rich in lycopene, which may have beneficial health effects.

In the last sentence, the noun and pronoun no longer agree because the noun *tomato* is singular and the pronoun *they* is plural. If we only look at the last sentence, though, we have no way of knowing whether the agreement is correct or incorrect – we must look at the surrounding sentences in order to spot the inconsistency. **While a pronoun disagreement may sometimes occur within a sentence, you will very often need to look at the surrounding sentences to determine whether there is an error.**

A. One vs. You

You → You
One → One

While both *one* and *you* can be used to talk about people in general, the two pronouns cannot be mixed and matched within a sentence or paragraph but must remain consistent throughout. In addition, they should not be paired with any other pronoun.

If you cannot recognize pronoun errors in the original version of the passage, the most efficient way to solve these questions is to start with the answer choices and work backwards from there. In order for this technique to be effective, however, you must be able to recognize common pronouns as well as remember to read the surrounding sentences (before and, if necessary, after) if the error is not apparent from the sentence with the underlined pronoun.

For example:

If you want to avoid insect invasions, you should avoid leaving crumbs lying on the floor. You should also avoid leaving dirty dishes in the sink since ants and mice are attracted to leftovers. Finally, one should make sure that cracks in the floor and walls are sealed because pests can often enter homes by wriggling through tiny spaces.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. We
C. They
D. You

Let's analyze this question. If you were just to read the sentence with the underlined pronoun on its own, you probably wouldn't see anything wrong. This is where a lot of people run into trouble: instead of looking at the surrounding sentences for an error, they simply pick (A) and move on.

But here the answer choices, particularly (D), provide a big clue as to what the sentence is testing. All of the options include pronouns, telling us that we need to look around and see what other pronouns are in the paragraph; the rest of the sentence with the underlined pronoun doesn't help because it contains no other pronouns.

When we look at the other sentences in the paragraph, we can see that they contain the pronoun *you*. That means that the pronoun in this sentence must match. So (D) is the only possible answer.

Bonus points if you caught the pronoun shift in this explanation.

B. People vs. Things

Sometimes different pronouns are used to refer to people and to things.

People (e.g. painters, doctors, musicians):

| <u>Singular Nouns</u> | | <u>Plural Nouns</u> |
|-----------------------|---|---------------------|
| She, He | → | They |
| Her, His | → | Their |

On the ACT, questions testing singular and plural pronouns often test *one* and *you* at the same time.

For example:

Mae Jemison became the first African-American woman to travel into space when she went into orbit aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour on September 12, 1992. After one's medical education and a brief general practice, Jemison served in the Peace Corps for two years.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. her
C. their
D. your

Since the underlined pronoun can only refer to Mae Jemison, who is clearly female, *her* is the sole possibility, and the answer must be (B). Provided that you actually read the passages and don't just skip from question to question, these tend to be among the most straightforward questions on the English section.

Important: When it is unclear whether a singular noun (e.g. an artist, an architect, a cook) refers to a male or a female, the phrase "he or she" or "his or her" should be used. Although "they" is considered an acceptable gender-neutral alternative in everyday English, the ACT is more concerned with your ability to match singular pronouns to singular nouns, and plural pronouns to plural nouns.

Incorrect: When an artist works with oil paints, **they** should allow at least a week for paintings to dry.

Correct: When an artist works with oil paints, **he or she** should allow at least a week for paintings to dry.

Incorrect: An artist who works with oil paints should allow at least a week for **their** paintings to dry.

Correct: An artist who works with oil paints should allow at least a week for **his or her** paintings to dry.

Things (e.g. cities, books, paintings):

| <u>For Singular Nouns</u> | | <u>For Plural Nouns</u> |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| It | → | They/Them |
| Its | → | Their |
| This | → | These |
| That | → | Those |

Important: the most commonly tested pronoun pairs are “it vs. they” and “its vs. their.”

Questions testing pronoun agreement often include distractor answers that make them seem more complicated than they actually are. While most of these questions are relatively straightforward if you know what to look for, they can also become unnecessarily tricky and/or time consuming if you don't.

For example:

The cacao bean is the dried and fully
fermented fatty bean of the cacao tree
(Theobroma cacao). Their¹ the source of cocoa
butter and solids, including chocolate, as well
as an ingredient in many Mesoamerican dishes
such as molé and tejate.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. It is
C. One is
D. They're

Let's start by looking at the answer choices. We have four different pronouns: *their* (don't ever forget the “NO CHANGE” option), *it*, *one*, and *they're*. Since all of the verbs agree with the subjects, agreement isn't important. On the other hand, the presence of both singular and plural pronouns tells you that you need to check pronoun agreement. That means you must ask yourself what noun that pronoun refers to (*what* is the source of cocoa butter and solids...?) and whether that noun is singular or plural.

When you back up to the previous sentence, you can see that the pronoun must refer to *the cacao bean*. Since *cacao bean* is singular, you need a singular pronoun: *it*. That leaves (B) as the only possibility.

Note that it does not matter that the pronoun *they* would logically refer to the plural noun *cacao beans*. The problem is that the words *cacao beans* do not actually appear in the paragraph, and **a pronoun can only refer to a word that actually appears.**

What happens to many students when they encounter a question like this, however, is that they immediately get distracted by (D). They know that *they're* = *they are*, which makes sense in the original version, and that *there is* possessive and doesn't make sense, so they immediately assume that the question is testing “they're vs. their” and pick (D). It never occurs to them that the question could really be testing “it vs. they.” In order to avoid making this error, you must train yourself to notice when both singular and plural pronouns are included among the answer choices.

C. Missing or Ambiguous Antecedent

As mentioned on the previous page, the noun to which a pronoun refers must appear either in the same sentence as the pronoun or in a surrounding sentence. Typically it will appear in an earlier sentence (most often the sentence immediately before), but occasionally it will appear in a later one.

When the noun that a pronoun refers to is missing or unclear, it is necessary to make it clear which noun the pronoun refers to. On the ACT, that often involves adding the specific name of the person, place, or thing that the pronoun refers to. For example:

Daniel Liebeskind and Ken Nakamura are among the most celebrated architects in the world. He is known for creating simulated “cities” in which he seeks to simultaneously express the physical and virtual worlds.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. Their
C. Nakamura is
D. He would be

Because *Daniel* and *Ken* are both male names, we have no way of knowing which architect *he* refers to. Only (C) makes it clear by supplying the actual name.

Important: although the shortest answer is often correct on the ACT, this pattern does not apply to missing/ambiguous antecedent questions. In fact, the longest answer is often correct. For example:

Some sources claim that Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés was the first person to bring the tomato to Europe in 1521. Others say that Christopher Columbus, a Genoese working for the Spanish monarchy, took it back as early as 1493. Regardless of which version is true, reports from that time period all agree that they were intensely suspicious when they first encountered the small yellow fruit.

2. F. NO CHANGE
G. one was
H. members of the Spanish court were
J. we were

Since the passage describes how two explorers brought the tomato back to Europe, it makes sense that “they” would refer to the Europeans who first encountered it – but the noun *Europeans* doesn’t actually appear. We must therefore insert a noun that clearly indicates who was “intensely suspicious.” Only (H) supplies that noun.

Pronoun Case

Pronoun case questions appear rarely on the ACT, but they do show up every so often, so if you're aiming for a 30+ score, you should be prepared for how to handle them.

Case refers to whether a pronoun is being used as a **subject** or an **object**.

Nouns that act as subjects can be replaced by **subject pronouns**:

| | Singular | Plural |
|------------------------|---------------|--------|
| 1 st person | I | We |
| 2 nd person | You | You |
| 3 rd person | She/He/It/One | They |

If we replace the subjects in the following sentences with subject pronouns, they become:

1. **Hernán Cortés** was the first explorer to bring the tomato to Europe.
→ **He** was the first explorer to bring the tomato to Europe.
2. **Members of the Spanish Court** were intensely suspicious of the small yellow fruit.
→ **They** were intensely suspicious of the small yellow fruit.
3. Tramping through the woods, **Jane and I** could hear birds singing and leaves crackling.
→ Tramping through the woods, **we** could hear birds singing and leaves crackling.

Nouns that act as objects can be replaced by **object pronouns**:

| | Singular | Plural |
|------------------------|----------------|--------|
| 1 st person | Me | Us |
| 2 nd person | You | You |
| 3 rd person | Her/Him/It/One | Them |

If we replace the objects in the following sentences with object pronouns, they become:

1. Members of the Spanish Court greeted Hernán Cortés with surprise.
→ Members of the Spanish court greeted **him** with surprise.
2. Architect Ken Nakamura is known for designing simulated "**cities**."
→ Architect Ken Nakamura is known for designing **them**.
3. Later on that day, Jane's dog sat with **Jane and me** in the garden.
→ Later on that day, Jane's dog sat with **us** in the garden.

When you look at the charts on the previous page, notice that some pronouns have the same subject and object forms (e.g. *it, one, you*) while others can only be used as subjects or objects (e.g. *me, she, they*).

In contrast, all proper names (*Hernán Cortés, Jane, Ken Ito*) can be either subjects or objects.

So, for example, we can write the following sentence several ways:

Correct: Yesterday evening, Ann went to the museum with Bob.

Correct: Yesterday evening, **she** went to the museum with Bob. (*Ann* replaced with subject pronoun)

Correct: Yesterday evening, Ann went to the museum with **him**. (*Bob* replaced with object pronoun)

What we cannot do, however, is replace a subject pronoun with an object pronoun or vice-versa.

Incorrect: Yesterday evening, **her** went to the museum with Bob.

Incorrect: Yesterday evening, she went to the museum with **he**.

Incorrect: Yesterday evening, **her** went to the museum with **he**.

When subjects and objects are singular, mistakes are pretty easy to catch by ear, regardless of whether you know anything about grammar. But when subjects and objects are plural, things suddenly get trickier. For example:

Correct: Yesterday evening, Ann and Rosita went to the museum with Bob.

But what happens if we want to replace *Ann* with a pronoun. Do we say *She and Rosita went to museum with Bob*, or *Her and Rosita went to the museum with Bob*? The key is to cross out the proper name + *and* in order to make the pronoun singular. When the pronoun is singular, any error can be easily heard.

Incorrect: Yesterday evening, her ~~and Rosita~~ went to the museum with Bob.

Since you wouldn't say *her went to the museum with Bob*, you wouldn't say *her and Rosita went to the museum with Bob* either. You would, however, say *she went to the museum with Bob*. Therefore:

Correct: Yesterday evening, **she** and Rosita went to the museum with Bob.

The same thing is true for object pronouns:

Incorrect: Yesterday evening, Ann went to the museum with **he and Rosita**.

Cross out: Yesterday evening, Ann went to the museum with he ~~and Rosita~~.

Correct: Yesterday evening, Ann went to the museum with **him**.

Correct: Yesterday evening, Ann went to the museum with **him and Rosita**.

Sometimes, though, the underlined pronoun or pronouns will not be paired with a proper name. For example:

At the exhibit, Mark and I stood staring at
the sculpture of a crow. Mark asked if he could
touch it, and slowly, the artist picked the piece
up and handed it to him and I.

1. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. us
C. we
D. them

The easiest way to handle these questions is to treat them essentially the same as you would a pronoun paired with a proper name – that is, cross out each pronoun + *and* in turn.

Cross out: ...the artist picked up the piece and handed it to **him and I**.

It's fine to say *the artist...handed it to him*, but now we need to make sure to check the other side:

Cross out: ...the artist picked up the piece and handed it to **him and I**.

It's not correct to say *the artist...handed it to I*, so (A) can be eliminated.

Now plug in each of the remaining answers:

(B) ...the artist picked up the piece and handed it to **us**.

Yes, that sounds ok, and it makes sense since the writer talks about "Mark and I."

(C) ...the artist picked up the piece and handed it to **we**.

No, that's clearly wrong.

(D) ... the artist picked up the piece and handed it to **them**.

That sounds ok, but it doesn't make sense. The writer is talking about "Mark and I," not other people.

So the answer is (B).

As a **shortcut** you can also use the following rule: **any pronoun that comes after a preposition must be an object pronoun.**

Given the context of the sentence, (D) clearly does not make any sense and can be eliminated immediately. (A) and (C) can also be eliminated because *to* is a preposition, which must be followed by an object pronoun, and *he*, *I*, and *we* are all subject pronouns. That leaves (B), which is correct because *us* is an object pronoun.

Drill: Pronoun Agreement and Case (answers p. 253)

1. There are over 3,000 lizard species, but the Komodo dragon, a reptile with ancestors that date back more than 100 million years, wins the prize for being the largest living lizard in the world. Its name came from rumors of a large dragon-like lizard inhabiting the warm, hilly islands of Indonesia. Indeed, the yellow color of its long, forked tongue reminds people of a mythical fire-spitting dragon. Despite its ancient roots, the Komodo dragon was unknown to them until 1910, when it was observed in Komodo National Park.

1. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. Their
C. They're
D. It's
2. **F.** NO CHANGE
G. those people
H. us
J. scientists

2. Along the coast of Florida, where I live with my family, big storms are a common occurrence. Every year from June to October, me and them gather around the television, watching anxiously as the forecaster announces whether each new storm will hit our town – and how severe their impact will be. Last year, we found ourselves directly in the path of a hurricane. As the storm bore down on us, the lights began to flicker wildly, and only moments later it went out altogether. Three hours later, they still hadn't come back on.

1. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. I and them
C. me and they
D. we
2. **F.** NO CHANGE
G. they're
H. its
J. it's
3. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. this
C. they
D. we

3. Space is a dangerous place. You cannot breathe, scream, or do much of anything without a spaceship to protect oneself. Even inside the spaceship, performing simple tasks can become an adventure. But what about frying? Believe it or not, the problem of frying food in space has become the subject of serious scientific investigation.

Prompted by a Russian cosmonaut who craved fried potatoes while living at the International Space Station (ISS), they investigated the “effect of increased gravitational acceleration in potato deep-fat frying” for *International Food Research*.

In order to study this question, the researchers, John S. Lioumbas and Thodoris D. Karapantsios, stuck a deep-fryer onto a giant centrifuge at the European Space Research and Technology Center. He found that at a force of 3-g, which is three times Earth’s gravity, the potatoes formed a perfect crispy crust in around half the usual time. Making French fries would be very difficult on the ISS, though. On Earth, the hot liquid at the base of a pan rises because their density is lower than that of the cooler liquid above. In space, however, the hot liquid doesn’t rise, and the crust never forms. The result: soggy fries – without a crust.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. yourself
C. him or herself
D. themselves

2. F. NO CHANGE
G. he
H. someone
J. two researchers

3. A. NO CHANGE
B. They
C. One
D. We

4. F. NO CHANGE
G. its
H. it’s
J. they’re

4. Almost immediately, you sense that it isn't

going to be a typical afternoon at the museum.

The first thing one sees is a forty-something man

¹
astride a saddle, a Manila hemp lariat in his hand,

whooping it up as you watch him try to rope a

wooden calf on the floor. He's missing,

but is clearly under the impression he shouldn't be,

and so they keep trying. That's a theme of the

²
New Mexico History Museum's exhibit

"Cowboys, Real and Imagined," which is hands-on,

familiar, and full of lessons to be learned.

Ask a person to describe a cowboy, and

he or she will probably mention a ten-gallon hat,

³
a pair of boots, and a trusty steed. Those

characteristics have they're roots in the sixteenth

⁴
century. At that time, they brought over horses

⁵
from the Iberian peninsula in Spain. Herders with a

long tradition of managing livestock on the rolling

hills of the Iberian Peninsula, the *vaqueros* set up

shop in New Mexico. As time went on,

our leather boots, stoicism, and devotion to their

⁶
horses became synonymous with the American

cowboy.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. they see
C. you see
D. he sees

2. F. NO CHANGE
G. one keeps
H. you keep
J. he keeps

3. A. NO CHANGE
B. they
C. him or her
D. he or her

4. F. NO CHANGE
G. their
H. its
J. it's

5. A. NO CHANGE
B. one
C. we
D. a group known as *vaqueros*

6. F. NO CHANGE
G. one's
H. their
J. his

5. It's common to hear people complain that you're¹ just looking for a little peace and quiet. When they say "quiet," though, they're probably not thinking of a place like the anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in Minnesota. The chamber is considered the quietest place on earth – so quiet that its² noise level is measured in negative decibels. According to the lab's founder, Steven Orfield, "You'll hear your heart beating, sometimes you can hear your lungs, hear your stomach gurgling loudly. In the anechoic chamber, one becomes³ the sound." Because the chamber is so silent, companies often test its⁴ products there to find out just how much noise they make. NASA has also sent astronauts to help them adapt to the silence of space. For most people, however, the room is a deeply disconcerting place. Auditory cues are necessary to balance and walk. Without it⁵, people have trouble orienting themselves and even standing. Despite that, laboratory researchers compete to see how long he or she⁶ can stay in the chamber. The record? Forty-five minutes.

1. A. NO CHANGE
 B. their
 C. they're
 D. one is

2. F. NO CHANGE
 G. their
 H. its'
 J. it's

3. A. NO CHANGE
 B. one would become
 C. they have become
 D. you become

4. F. NO CHANGE
 G. they're
 H. these
 J. their

5. A. NO CHANGE
 B. this
 C. him
 D. them

6. F. NO CHANGE
 G. one
 H. they
 J. we