**LECTURE 6.1**

**PRONOUN**

​​ You use pronouns every day. In fact, even if you don’t know what pronouns are, you use them—and in this sentence alone, we’ve now used pronouns four times.

Pronouns are the words you substitute for other [nouns](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/nouns/) when your reader or listener already knows which nouns you’re referring to. For example, you might say, “I have a dog. He’s brown and white.” There’s no need to clarify that you’re describing your dog in the second sentence because you already mentioned him in the first. But following up “I have a dog” with “brown and white” is grammatically incorrect . . . so with the pronoun “he’s,” you turn the[phrase](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/phrases/) “brown and white” into a full sentence: He’s brown and white.

Pronouns do a whole lot more than turn phrases into sentences. They provide context, make your sentences’ meanings clearer, and shape how we perceive people and things. Read on to learn about the different ways we use pronouns and how to use them to construct sentences.

**What is a pronoun?**

Pronouns are short words we swap in for other nouns to make our writing and speech faster and more varied. They’re words like:

* They
* I
* You
* Who
* Themselves
* Each other

Pronouns make up a small subcategory of nouns. The distinguishing characteristic of pronouns is that they can be substituted for other nouns. For instance, if you’re telling a story about your sister Sarah, the story will begin to sound repetitive if you keep repeating “Sarah” over and over again. For example:

* Sarah has always loved fashion. Sarah announced that Sarah wants to go to fashion school.

You could try to mix it up by sometimes referring to Sarah as “my sister,” but then it sounds like you’re referring to two different people:

* Sarah has always loved fashion. My sister announced that Sarah wants to go to fashion school.

Instead, you can use the pronouns she and her to refer to Sarah:

* Sarah has always loved fashion. She announced that she wants to go to fashion school.

Pronouns can replace both proper and common nouns. Certain pronouns have specific rules about when they can be used, such as how *it* should never be used to refer to a human being. We explain all of the different types and their associated rules below.

**Personal pronouns**

When you think of pronouns, you most likely think of[personal pronouns](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/personal-pronouns/). Personal pronouns are pronouns that refer to specific individuals and groups. Personal pronouns include:

* I/me
* She/her
* He/him
* They/them
* We/us
* You

Here are a few examples of personal pronouns in italics, with the nouns they’re referring to bolded:

* **The new student** will arrive today. *They* will need a seating assignment and a name tag.
* **My family** loves nachos. *We* make them every Friday for movie night.

In the second example sentence, notice that **nachos** (a noun) and **them** (a pronoun) aren’t emphasized. That’s because in this sentence, **them** isn’t a personal pronoun because it isn’t replacing a proper noun, but rather **we** is.

**Antecedents**

Remember how we mentioned that in order to use a pronoun, you need to introduce the noun first? That noun has a name:[an antecedent](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/grammar-basics-pronoun-antecedent-agreement/).

Antecedents are necessary because pronouns are versatile. Think about it—“it” can refer to a bike, a tree, a car, or a city, and we just used it to refer to something else entirely: pronouns’ versatility. Take a look at these examples to see how antecedents and pronouns work together:

* *My family* tests my patience, but I love **them**.
* *The sign* was too far away for Jorge to read **it**.
* *Danita* said **she** is almost finished with the application.

Antecedents aren’t necessary when the reader/listener knows who or what you’re discussing. Generally, you don’t need an antecedent for pronouns like *I, you, we, our,*and *me.* But because there are no absolutes in grammar, sometimes you **do** need an antecedent in this kind of situation—like when you’re giving a speech where you introduce yourself and your credentials before discussing your achievements.

There are also circumstances where you might not introduce the noun first and instead reveal it after using only pronouns to refer to your subject. You might do this for dramatic or poetic effect in a piece of creative writing.

**Relative pronouns**

[Relative pronouns](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/relative-pronouns/) are another class of pronouns. They connect[relative clauses to independent clauses](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/clauses/). Often, they introduce additional information about something mentioned in the sentence. Relative pronouns include these words:

* that
* what
* which
* who
* whom

Traditionally, **who** refers to people, and **which** and **that** refer to animals or things. Here are a few examples of relative pronouns at work:

* *The woman* **who** called earlier didn’t leave a message.
* All the *dogs* **that** got adopted today will be loved.
* *My car*, **which** is nearly twenty years old, still runs well.

Who vs. whom—subject and object pronouns

[Knowing when to use **who** and when to use **whom**](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/who-vs-whom-its-not-as-complicated-as-you-might-think/) trips a lot of writers up. The difference is actually pretty simple:[**Who** is for the subject of a sentence, and **whom** is for the object of a verb or preposition](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/the-basics-on-subject-and-object-pronouns-b/). Here’s a quick example:

* *Who*mailed this package?
* To *whom* was this package sent?

See the difference? **Who** is a subject pronoun. It’s in the same category as *I, he, she, they,*and *we.***Whom**is an object pronoun, which puts it in the same category as *me, him, her, them,*and *us.*An easy way to determine whether you should use who or whom in a sentence is to answer the sentence’s question by substituting another pronoun. With the new pronoun in place, determine if the sentence still makes sense. For example:

* *He* mailed this package.
* The package was sent to *him.*

Figuring out when to use **whom** can be more difficult than knowing when to use **who** because it typically comes before the sentence’s verb—notice how the example object pronoun sentence changed more dramatically than the subject pronoun sentence.

**Demonstrative pronouns**

*That, this, these*, and *those* are demonstrative pronouns. They take the place of a noun or noun phrase that has already been mentioned or is clear through context, either in written or verbal communication.

*This* is used for singular items that are nearby. *These* is used for multiple items that are nearby. The distance can be physical or metaphorical. Take a look at these examples:

* Here is a letter with no return address. Who could have sent **this**?
* What a fantastic idea! **This** is the best thing I’ve heard all day.
* If you think gardenias smell nice, try smelling **these**.

*That* is used for singular items that are far away.*Those* is used for multiple items that are far away. Again, the distance can be physical or metaphorical. Here are a few examples of these pronouns in action:

* A house like **that** would be a nice place to live.
* Some new flavors of soda came in last week. Why don’t you try some of **those**?
* **Those** aren’t swans, they’re geese.

**Indefinite pronouns**

Indefinite pronouns are used when you need to refer to a person or thing that doesn’t need to be specifically identified. Some common indefinite pronouns are *one, other, none, some, anybody, everybody*, and *no one*.

Here are a few examples of indefinite pronouns in sentences:

* **Everybody** was late to work because of the traffic jam.
* It matters more to **some** than others.
* **Nobody** knows the trouble I’ve seen.

When indefinite pronouns function as subjects of a sentence or clause, they usually take singular verbs.

**Reflexive pronouns**

[Reflexive pronouns](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/reflexive-pronouns/) end in **-self**or **-selves**:

* Myself
* Yourself
* Himself
* Herself
* Itself
* Oneself
* Ourselves
* Yourselves
* Themselves

Use a reflexive pronoun when both the subject and object of a verb refer to the same person or thing. Here are a few examples:

* **She**checked **herself** out of the hotel thirty minutes before check-out time.
* Take care of **yourselves**.

Using **myself** when you mean **me** is a common mistake writers and speakers make. Reflexive pronouns are only correct **when the subject and object of a sentence are the same.**

**Intensive pronouns**

[Intensive pronouns](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/intensive-pronouns/) look the same as reflexive pronouns, but their purpose is different. Intensive pronouns add emphasis. Conceptualizing the difference between them and reflexive pronouns can be challenging because the emphasis isn’t always obvious. Take a look at these examples of intensive pronouns and examine how they’re different from the examples in the previous section:

* **I**told them I could do it **myself**.
* **We** asked **ourselves**, is this business really worth saving?

If you can remove a pronoun from a sentence and it loses emphasis but its meaning stays the same, it’s most likely an intensive pronoun. Compare these two sentences:

* I built this house.
* I built this house **myself**.

See how the second one emphasizes that the builder had no outside help? Intensive pronouns can help you express pride, shock, disbelief, credulousness (or incredulousness), or any other strong emotion. Here are a few more examples:

* They hiked the entire Appalachian Trail **themselves**?
* Did you, **yourself**, see Loretta spill the coffee?

**Possessive pronouns**

[Possessive pronouns](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/possessive-pronouns/) are pronouns that show possession. They include the following:

* My
* Your
* Our
* Their
* His
* Her
* Its

These can also be called possessive adjectives if they modify a noun in a sentence. Take a look at these examples of possessive adjectives in action:

* I crashed **my** bike into a telephone pole.
* **Your** house is always decorated so nicely.

This category also includes independent versions of possessive pronouns. These include:

* Mine
* Yours
* Ours
* His
* Hers
* Theirs
* Its

When you use an independent possessive pronoun, you drop the noun it’s referring to. Here are a few examples:

* She forgot her jacket, so I gave her **mine**.
* I had no idea whose bid won the auction, then my cousins told me **theirs** did.

**Interrogative pronouns**

Interrogative pronouns are used in questions. The interrogative pronouns are *who, what, which,* and *whose.*Here are a few examples of interrogative pronouns at play:

* **Who** wants a bag of jelly beans?
* **What** is your name?
* **Which** movie do you want to watch?
* **Whose** jacket is this?

**Reciprocal pronouns**

There are only two reciprocal pronouns:

* Each other
* One another

These pronouns refer to two or more people who are **both** the subject of the sentence. Take a look at these examples:

* Javier and Priya, the two top salespeople on our team, are competing with **each other** for Salesperson of the Year.
* All my siblings are blaming **one another**for letting the boa constrictor out last Thanksgiving.

**Distributive pronouns**

Distributive pronouns refer to people, animals, and objects as individuals within larger groups. They enable you to single out individuals while acknowledging that they’re part of a larger group. Distributive pronouns include the following:

* Either
* Each
* Neither
* Any
* None

Here are a few examples of distributive pronouns in sentences:

* All of my friends entered the costume contest and **none** of them won.
* Cookies and muffins are available for dessert. **Neither** is appealing to me.

**Pronoun examples**

As you can see, pronouns do **a lot**. And there are a lot of them. And to make them even more complicated, many pronouns change forms when they’re used in different positions within a sentence or different tenses.

Take a look at the different types of pronouns and their forms at a glance:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type** | **Pronouns in this category** | **Example sentences** |
| **Personal** | I/me, they/them, he/him, she/her, it, we/us, you | * I brought all the snacks. * We weren’t planning on staying over. |
| **Relative** | That, what, which, who, whom | * My car, which is twenty years old, doesn’t connect to Bluetooth. * The professor who ran the meeting ended it promptly |
| **Demonstrative** | That, this, these, those | * You’ve seen clear quartz and smoky quartz, but have you seen these stones? * I ordered Hawaiian pizza. I like that a lot. |
| **Indefinite** | One, other, some, none, everybody, anybody, no one, nobody, both | * We need cashiers up front. Anybody who’s available, please report to the front end. * “Why can’t we fix this?” I asked nobody in particular. |
| **Reflexive** | Myself, yourself/yourselves, themself/themselves, herself, himself, oneself, itself, ourselves | * The car began to swerve, then corrected itself. * He made himself a sandwich. |
| **Intensive** | Myself, yourself/yourselves, themself/themselves, herself, himself, oneself, itself, ourselves | * You did all of this yourself? * She did the entire group project by herself. |
| **Possessive** | My, your, his, her, their, our, its, whose | * We’re lounging out by our pool. * His car is green. |
| **Interrogative** | Who, what, which, whose | * Whose bike is this? * What is the answer? |
| **Reciprocal** | Each other, one another | * We ran into each other on the subway. * They’ve been fighting with one another for decades. |
| **Distributive** | Either, each, neither, any, none | * Peanut butter or chocolate? I’m good with either. * There were four cats, and none had long hair. |

**Pronouns and gender identity**

You might have noticed pronouns listed in some of your colleagues’ and friends’ email signatures or social media profiles. You might have even been prompted to list your pronouns in your own. While traditionally the personal pronouns *he/him/his* and *she/her/hers* were used for individuals based strictly on their sex, pronoun usage is broader and more descriptive today.

Many people use [gender-neutral language](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/gender-neutral-language/) like *they/them/theirs* and *zie/hir/hirs*because they feel these pronouns express their gender identity more accurately than *she* or *he.* The most common gender-neutral pronoun is[the singular *they*](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/use-the-singular-they/)*.* Today, it’s not uncommon to see the singular *they* as the default neutral pronoun. It’s what we use on the Grammarly blog, and for writers across the internet, it’s a concise catch-all pronoun that can fit just about any sentence. However, language is constantly evolving, and new types of singular third-person pronouns have emerged that refer to people entirely without reference to gender, such as noun-self pronouns.

**Gender-neutral and gender-inclusive pronouns**

When somebody tells you their pronouns, using their pronouns is an act of respect. Think of it like spelling or pronouncing that person’s name correctly—they’re the authority on who they are and how they express themselves, and referring to them the way they’ve asked you to refer to them affirms this.

For some gender-neutral and gender-inclusive pronouns, the different forms to use are obvious. For others, they aren’t. Take a look at this table including some of the most common gender-neutral and inclusive pronouns:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Object** | **Possessive Determiner** | **Possessive Pronoun** | **Reflexive** |
| I | me | my | mine | myself |
| we | us | our | ours | ourselves |
| you | you | your | yours | yourselves |
| he | him | his | his | himself |
| she | her | her | hers | herself |
| it | it | its | its | itsels |
| they | them | their | theirs | themself |

If you ever aren’t sure of the correct pronouns to use when referring to somebody, just ask them! And if you accidentally use the wrong pronoun, simply apologize for doing so and make an effort to use the correct pronoun in future conversations.