Understanding Pronouns

Author/Creation: Karalyn Jones, January 2010.
Summary: Describes the nine categories of pronouns.
Learning Objectives: To describe the function of each of the nine categories of pronouns.

Pronouns are one of the basic parts of speech in English—they refer to or stand in for a noun. The basic rule for using pronouns effectively is to make sure you’ve clearly identified the noun, called the antecedent, that the pronoun is standing in for.

There are many rules for using pronouns because there are countless nouns they can stand for and many ways they can be used in a sentence. Knowing the nine categories of pronouns, which is what you’ll find in this handout, will give you an excellent start on understanding those rules. What follows is a basic explanation of each of the nine categories: personal, possessive, reflexive, intensive, relative, interrogative, demonstrative, indefinite, and reciprocal.

Note that a pronoun can be included in more than one category. Pronouns are categorized according to their function, and some can function in multiple ways.

Personal Pronouns
Personal pronouns are pronouns that refer to people or things. These pronouns can be further categorized into singular or plural; first, second, or third person; and subjective or objective case (i.e. functioning as the subject or an object in a sentence, respectively). There is a third case, possessive, that we will handle separately below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>me</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>him, her, it</td>
<td>them</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note
• The first person indicates the person speaking or writing.
• The second person indicates the person being spoken or written to.
• The third person indicates the person, people, thing or things being spoken or written about (Person, 2000).
Examples:
I am not going to the party. [First person, singular, subjective]
The fight ends with me. [First person, singular, objective]

We couldn’t discover the root of the issue. [First person, plural, subjective]
Could you provide us with some privacy? [First person, plural, objective]

You make me smile. [Second person, singular, subjective]
Is Jimmy taking you? [Second person, singular, objective]

You must pass the exam before employment can be considered. [Second person, plural, subjective]
Samson, Inc is here to help you. [Second person, plural, objective]

*Note that in the second person, you is both singular and plural and used in both the subjective and objective case.

She taught them to identify patterns in an unusual way. [Third person, singular, subjective]
The ball would have hit him. [Third person, singular, objective]

They were unsure of their conclusions. [Third person, plural, subjective]
She taught them to identify patterns in an unusual way. [Third person, plural, objective]

Possessive Pronouns
The third pronoun case is possessive. Possessive pronouns function as adjectives that indicate ownership or relationship – Jones is my favorite person. They can be identified as first, second, or third person and singular or plural as well.

Note: Do not use apostrophes with possessive pronouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>my, mine</td>
<td>our, ours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>your</td>
<td>your, yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>his, hers, its</td>
<td>their, theirs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The forms that end in –s typically come after a verb.

Examples:
We are leaving our lives in the hands of the rescue team. [First person, plural]
The others’ opinions are irrelevant; the only one that matters is yours. [Second person, singular]
Their conclusions overstepped the bounds of their research. [Third person, plural]
I cannot find its case. [Third person, singular]

Reflexive Pronouns
As suggested by their title, these nouns reflect the reader’s attention back to the subject of the sentence – Sara completed the project by herself. Reflexive pronouns are used in two main situations: when the subject and direct object are the same thing and when the subject and object of a preposition are the same.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>myself</td>
<td>ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>yourself</td>
<td>yourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>himself, herself,</td>
<td>themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The forms Hisself, theirselves, and themself are not words in the English language.
Examples:
Situation ONE: James shot himself in the foot.
Situation TWO: I talk to myself quite relentlessly. You are more afraid of yourself than anyone else.

**Intensive Pronouns**
These have the same form as reflexive pronouns but are used to emphasize the subject—They themselves were unsure. Note: A way to distinguish between reflexive and intensive pronouns is to remove the pronoun from the sentence – if the sentence still makes sense, the pronoun is intensive.

Examples:
We ourselves would have never considered it an option.
I have climbed Everest three times myself.

**Relative Pronouns**
Relative pronouns introduce describing clauses. They are categorized into those used for people (who, whom, and whose) and those used for things (which and that). People pronouns are either subjective or objective and either restrictive or non-restrictive, and thing pronouns are either restrictive or non-restrictive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Possessive</th>
<th>Non-Restrictive</th>
<th>Restrictive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>who/whose</td>
<td>whom</td>
<td>whose</td>
<td>which</td>
<td>That which</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pronoun whom tends to be a tricky one. One rule of thumb for using whom is to ask whether it is followed by another pronoun—if there is a pronoun or noun after the whom, whom is probably the correct choice. (Ex. The writer whom he disliked was presenting.) Another way to determine if you need whom rather than who is to determine whether it comes after a preposition—As for whom she confided in, no one knew.

Note: Non-restrictive means the phrase can be removed from the sentence without changing the sentence’s overall meaning. For more information, check out the Academic Center handout titled Relative Clauses.

Examples:
Flagan’s report, which was published at the same time as Kain’s, presents a markedly different perspective. [non-restrictive—the description isn’t needed to identify the report and the detail is not the focus of the sentence]

Flagan’s report that was published at the same time as Kain’s presents a markedly different perspective. [Restrictive—in this version, the phrase is needed to identify which report is being discussed.]

Writing is a process that involves many steps. [restrictive—the description is needed to specify the essential nature of the process being discussed, and the description is the focus of the sentence]

Alex consulted an author whom he met at a conference. [objective—whom is the object for the verb met and it is restrictive.]

Writers who let their purpose supersede their audience never meet their purpose. [subjective—who is the subject of the clause who let their purpose supersede their audience. And the clause is restrictive: the discussion is about those particular writers, the ones who let their purpose supersede their audience.]

**Interrogative Pronouns**
These pronouns have the same form as relative pronouns but are used to introduce a question instead.

Examples:
Which one do you want?
Whose is this?
Whom are you looking for?
Who is it?
**Demonstrative Pronouns**
These four pronouns – *this, that, these, those* – are used to point to a specific noun or nouns and indicate a position relative to the speaker.

**Examples:**
*Are those* the shoes you wanted? [Points to a specific pair in a specific location away from the speaker.]
*Are these* the shoes you wanted? [Points to a specific location near the speaker.]
*These* ideas are what led to the fall. [Refers to previously identified ideas]

**Note:** A *naked this* is a demonstrative pronoun that doesn’t clearly refer to something discussed. Consider the following:

I couldn’t have been more wrong about the condition of my paper. *This* indicated how far I still needed to come as a writer.

Does the pronoun *this* refer to the writer’s being wrong or to the condition of the writer’s paper? The easiest way to fix a *naked this* is to include a noun that specifies what the pronoun is referring to:

This *misevaluation* indicated how far I still needed to come as a writer.

**Indefinite Pronouns**
Indefinite pronouns are considered *indefinite* because they do not refer directly to a clearly specified noun. While they often suggest a number or amount (some, all, everyone, few), the measure is not specific. These pronouns can be tricky because some of them can be both singular and plural.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always Singular</th>
<th>Sometimes Singular-Sometimes Plural</th>
<th>Always Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>another/other</td>
<td>no one/nobody</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anyone/anybody</td>
<td>nothing</td>
<td>few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anything</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>each</td>
<td>somebody/someone</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>either/neither</td>
<td>something</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone/everybody</td>
<td>everything</td>
<td>several</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little/much</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Examples:**
*Someone* has to take out the trash. (singular)
*Neither* of the participants was comfortable. (singular)
*Most* of the audience responds to this type of persuasion. (plural)
*Each* of the students identifies a *few* of his/her favorite hobbies. (singular; plural)

**Note:** For the pronouns that can be both singular and plural, their number depends on the noun they refer to:
*More* of the students *leave* early this semester. (plural)
*None* of his cereal *was* finished. (singular)
On a final note with these pronouns, consider the placement. If the pronoun is included immediately before a noun (i.e. All dogs go to heaven.), then the pronoun acts as an adjective. The verb of the sentence must agree with the noun that is its subject (dogs).

**Reciprocal Pronouns**
These pronouns are actually phrases made up of pairs of pronouns—*one another* and *each other*. These pronouns indicate a relationship between the individuals of the plural subject such that the individual members of the subject “take each other as their objects” (Perelman, Barrett, & Paradis, 2001, para.1).

**Examples:**
The athletes defended *one another* both on and off the field.
Jane and Bill are fond of *each other*.

**Practice Exercises**

**Exercise 1**
Each of the sentences below contains a pronoun. Identify the person (first, second, or third) of the pronoun and whether the pronoun is singular or plural and subjective or objective.

1. Christopher couldn’t find it.
2. Leave it to her to find the discrepancies.
3. To whom should Kyle speak then?
4. In the end, they would have rather gone through the chaos twice over than lose all that they had gained.

**Answers:**
1. Christopher couldn’t find it. [Third, singular, objective]
2. Leave it to her to find the discrepancies. [Third, singular, objective] & [Third, singular, objective]
3. To whom should Kyle speak then? [Singular, objective] Note: person doesn’t apply to whom.
4. In the end, they would have rather gone through the chaos twice over than lose all that they had gained. [Third, plural, subjective] & [Third, plural, subjective]

**Exercise 2**
Each of the sentences below contains an italicized noun or noun phrase. Identify the pronoun that could substitute for the noun or noun phrase in the sentence.

1. The package should be postmarked by Friday.
2. The keys to success depend on the success you’re after.
3. Dr. Seuss’s “Sleep Book” is Kirk’s favorite book.
4. A pitcher of water has potential energy.
5. Dr. Hodges, the doctor you met in Dallas, spoke at the Lyceum today.

**Answers:**
1. The package should be postmarked by Friday. [It, That]
2. The keys to success depend on the success you’re after. [They]
3. Dr. Seuss’s “Sleep Book” is Kirk’s favorite book. [his]
4. A pitcher of water has potential energy. [It, That]
5. Dr. Hodges, the doctor you met in Dallas, spoke at the Lyceum today. [whom]
Exercise 3
Each of the sentences or phrases below contains a pronoun. Determine whether the pronoun is used correctly, and identify the appropriate pronoun if it is not.

1. I would have gladly left it all behind.
2. This could have led to that demise.
3. To who it may concern:
4. Dillmore themselves questioned the wisdom in such an act.

Answers:
1. I would have gladly left it all behind. Correct.
2. This _____ could have led to that demise. Naked this. Any of several nouns could be included here to make this sentence correct.
3. To whom it may concern:
4. Dillmore himself questioned the wisdom in such an act.

References


http://writesite.cuny.edu/grammar/general/person/