

Pronouns: Cohesion within Paragraphs

Pronouns, words that rename nouns and noun phrases, can connect one sentence to the next to guide the reader through a paragraph. Pronouns are useful in several ways, but writers must know how to use pronouns appropriately to avoid confusion and ensure coherence. This handout outlines how to use pronouns to write a cohesive paragraph.

How are pronouns useful?

Pronouns are useful tools to use in one's writing for several reasons.

- Pronouns help **writers avoid repeating a noun monotonously**. Pronouns can be used to replace nouns that have previously been mentioned once or several times. Thus, pronouns help writers reduce wordiness.
- Pronouns help **readers track essential sentence elements**. If readers have verbal cues to follow—pronouns and transitions—they can forge connections between information in the paragraph to trace a unified sequence of ideas.

Sample Paragraph 1

“Harry had the best morning Harry’d had in a long time. Harry was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, [as] Dudley and Piers were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn’t fall back on Dudley and Piers’ favorite hobby of hitting Harry. Harry and the Dursleys ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because Dudley’s knickerbocker glory didn’t have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought Dudley another knickerbocker glory and Harry was allowed to finish the first. Harry felt, afterward, that Harry should have known the joy was all too good to last. After lunch Harry and the Dursleys went to the reptile house. The reptile house was cool and dark, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. The largest snake in the place could have wrapped the largest snake’s body twice around Uncle Vernon’s car and crushed the car into a trash can – but at the moment the largest snake in the place didn’t look in the mood. In fact, the largest snake in the place was fast asleep.”

The problem in this paragraph is that *no pronouns are used*. A paragraph that does not use any pronouns can be exhausting for the reader because it is excessively wordy, especially since long noun phrases are repeatedly used (e.g., “the largest snake in the place”).

How do I correctly use pronouns?

Pronouns can be difficult to use correctly. Readers must be able to infer the connection between the pronoun and the noun that the pronoun replaces. When using pronouns in your writing, keep in mind exactly who or what you're referring to.

How many are we talking about? So that readers envision the same number consistently, be sure that your noun and pronoun agree in number. Singular pronouns must be used to replace singular nouns, and plural pronouns must be used to replace plural nouns. For example, if you were to replace the name "Mary," you would not use "they" or "them," which are plural pronouns. You would use "she" or "her," which are singular pronouns.

Read the following example. What's wrong with the sentence?

A batter runs the bases once they hit the ball.

In this sentence, the reader is not sure how many batters are being referred to because the singular noun "batter" is used, but the plural pronoun "they" is also used. This sentence can be rewritten in one of the following ways:

*A batter runs the bases once he hits the ball.
Batters run the bases once they hit the ball.*

Are we talking about a person or a thing? Determine if you want your reader to imagine a person or thing. A common error that writers make is to refer to a person by using pronouns "it" or "which" or "that," pronouns that refer to objects. To refer to a person, use the pronouns "who" or "whom."

Sample Paragraph 2

"He had the best morning they'd had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from them so that they, which were starting to get bored with it by lunchtime, wouldn't fall back on his favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in it, and when he had a tantrum because it didn't have enough ice cream on top, he bought him another one and he was allowed to finish it. He felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last. After that they went to it. That was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind it, those were crawling and slithering over bits of it. They wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. He quickly found it. It could have wrapped its body twice around his car and crushed it into a trash can – but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep."

Confused? It is not you. This paragraph does not make sense. It has been altered to use pronouns almost exclusively. Indeed, pronouns are used so often that the readers cannot trace the references. If pronouns are used before the noun or noun phrase is identified, the reader is unsure

to whom or to what the pronouns are referring: who are “they,” and what is the “it”? The writer needs to name people, places, and things before replacing nouns and noun phrases with pronouns in subsequent sentences.

Also, *some pronouns do not match in number* with the nouns they are replacing. For example, in the first sentence of the above paragraph, the opening subject “he” is singular, and the subsequent subject “they’d” is plural. “He” refers to “Harry.” It is Harry in both cases who is having a good day, so “he’d” should be used instead of “they’d.”

Another problem here is that pronouns used to describe *people* are describing *objects* and vice versa. For example, in the second sentence, the writer should not use “which” because the sentence refers to people. Instead, the writer should use “who.” The next sample paragraph will illuminate the pronoun puzzle that no doubt confused you in the previous paragraph.

How do I use pronouns in a paragraph?

When using pronouns in a paragraph, the writer needs to make sure it is clear who or what the pronouns are referring to; a paragraph will not be cohesive if pronouns are improperly used. The following paragraph is the actual passage from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, by J.K. Rowling. How effective is the use of pronouns to control cohesion in the paragraph?

Sample Paragraph 3

“Harry had the best morning he’d had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn’t fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn’t have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first. Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last. After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon’s car and crushed it into a trash can – but at the moment it didn’t look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.”

There are several reasons why this paragraph is cohesive and easy for the reader to comprehend:

- There is a **mix** of nouns and pronouns.
- All nouns and noun phrases **are identified** before pronouns are used to replace them.
- Pronouns correctly refer to **people** or **objects**.
- Pronouns **match in number** with the nouns they are replacing.

Activity 1: Replacing Names with Pronouns

Underline the name “Poe” throughout the paragraph. Then, decide where pronouns can be used appropriately to replace the name “Poe.”

Edgar Allan Poe

“Poe was born in Boston in 1809 but grew up in Richmond, Virginia and attended the University of Virginia. Poe’s early years were plagued by the death of Poe’s mother when Poe was two, Poe’s first love when Poe was 15, and Poe’s foster mother when Poe was 20. After dropping out of college and getting expelled from West Point, Poe took a job as an editor at the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. Poe’s controversial fiction and scathing book reviews boosted the magazine’s circulation seven times in seventeen months, and Poe only got fired twice in the process. After Poe’s second termination, Poe took a series of editorial positions at the leading magazines in Philadelphia and New York and supplemented his income with lectures and public readings. Poe’s short story ‘The Gold Bug’ was a smash hit, but the publication of ‘The Raven’ made Poe internationally famous (while only earning him about \$15).”

Activity 2: Replacing Nouns and Noun Phrases with Pronouns

This paragraph uses mostly nouns and noun phrases. Underline all nouns and noun phrases and then replace them with appropriate pronouns.

The Fortune Teller

“The fortune teller moved the fortune teller’s dry, shriveled hands over the glass ball that the fortune teller had bought at a dollar store a long time ago. The fortune teller could hear the laughter and the occasional shouts of the children as the children ran outside from ride to ride and from tent to tent. The children never came in to see the fortune teller. Instead it was always the face of a laid-off dock worker or a romantic teenager who peered through the entrance way of the fortune teller’s tent. The unemployed dock workers wanted to hear about winning lottery tickets and new job opportunities. The teenagers were eager to hear stories about far-away places and dark, mysterious strangers. And so the fortune teller always told the dock workers and the teenagers what the dock workers and the teenagers wanted to hear. The fortune teller liked giving the dock workers and the teenagers something to dream about. The fortune teller tried to fill the minds of the dock workers and the teenagers with great expectations. Just then, a young man appeared in the entrance way. The young man was nervous, and the smile of the young man was timid. The young man shuffled into the dark tent, the young man’s head full of dreams and yet, at the same time, innocently empty. The fortune teller took the trembling hands of the young man into the fortune teller’s own hands and peered at the revealing lines etched on the palms of the young man. Then, slowly, in the cracked, ancient voice of the fortune teller, the fortune teller began to speak of new job opportunities, far away places, and dark, mysterious strangers.”

Answer Key for Activity 1

“Poe was born in Boston in 1809 but grew up in Richmond, Virginia and attended the University of Virginia. His early years were plagued by the death of his mother when he was two, his first love when he was 15, and his foster mother when he was 20. After dropping out of college and getting expelled from West Point, Poe took a job as an editor at the *Southern Literacy Messenger* in Richmond. His controversial fiction and scathing book reviews boosted the magazine’s

circulation seven times in seventeen months, and he only got fired twice in the process. After his second termination, Poe took a series of editorial positions at the leading magazines in Philadelphia and New York and supplemented his income with lectures and public readings. His short story ‘The Gold Bug’ was a smash hit, but the publication of ‘The Raven’ made him internationally famous (while only earning him about \$15).”

Answer Key for Activity 2

“The fortune teller moved her dry, shriveled hands over the glass ball that she had bought at a dollar store a long time ago. She could hear the laughter and the occasional shouts of the children as they ran outside from ride to ride and from tent to tent. They never came in to see her. Instead it was always the face of a laid-off dock worker or a romantic teenager who peered through the entrance way of her tent. The unemployed dock workers wanted to hear about winning lottery tickets and new job opportunities. The teenagers were eager to hear stories about far-away places and dark, mysterious strangers. And so the fortune teller always told them what they wanted to hear. She liked giving them something to dream about. She tried to fill their minds with great expectations. Just then, a young man appeared in the entrance way. He was nervous, and his smile was timid. He shuffled into the dark tent, his head full of dreams and yet, at the same time, innocently empty. The fortune teller took his trembling hands into her own hands and peered at the revealing lines etched on his palms. Then, slowly, in her cracked, ancient voice, she began to speak of new job opportunities, far away places, and dark, mysterious strangers.”

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