Pronouns

Their different types and roles
Definition of a pronoun: a pronoun is a word that replaces a noun or noun phrase.

- If we only used nouns to refer to people, animals and things, our sentences, both spoken and written, would be very long and tedious.

- For example, think about the difference between:
  i) Susan went to a nightclub, where Susan drank too many cocktails.
      and
  ii) Susan went to a nightclub where she drank too many cocktails.

In the second example, the pronoun she does the work that would otherwise have to be done by repetition of the earlier noun, ‘Susan’. Such repetition is tiresome and sounds bizarre. Someone reading or listening to the sentence may wonder whether there were two Susans at the nightclub.
More examples of how pronouns help us to be brief and elegant

- A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun or noun phrase.

- Two more examples:
  
  i) Under police questioning, Mr Wilson denied having been anywhere near the burgled house. However, a male witness said that he had seen him in the garden. (Which word has been replaced by which pronoun here?)

  ii) Peter and Sally are coming to the party. They will bring some food. (Here, the pronoun replaces a compound noun or noun phrase.)
8 kinds of pronouns with examples:

- Personal pronouns: - I, me, you, she
- Possessive pronouns – her, their, ours
- Reflexive pronouns – myself, yourselves
- Demonstrative pronouns – these, that
- Interrogative pronouns – who?, which?
- Relative pronouns – that, which, whose, what
- Indefinite pronouns – all, any, someone
- Reciprocal pronouns – one another, each other

Devised by Jo Killmister,
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Personal pronouns

- Personal pronouns have different forms depending on their **person** (first, second or third) and, usually, **number** (singular and plural). Sometimes, in the third person singular, they take different forms according to gender (he, she). They also take different forms depending on whether they stand for the **subject** or the **object** of the sentence.
Personal pronouns continued

- **First person pronouns** are I, me, we, us. These pronouns refer to the person doing the speaking or writing.

- The **second person pronoun**, whether singular or plural, is always you, meaning the person or persons being spoken to or addressed.

- **Third person pronouns** refer to those being spoken or written about: he, him, she, her, it, they, them. (Most third person pronouns refer to people, although they and them can refer to things and it is sometimes used about babies and animals. There are, as always in English, odd exceptions, such as the customary use of she or her for a ship.)

  (King, p. 80)

- Academic writing generally requires the use of the third person.
The **subject** of a sentence (or clause) is the person or thing doing something — in other words, the subject of the verb. Subject pronouns are as follows: *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who, whoever*.

The **object** of the sentence is whoever or whatever is having something done to it; it is the object of the verb: *me, you, him, her, it, us, them, whom, whomever*.
The generic personal pronoun “one”

- ‘One’ can stand for the average or generic person as in, ‘One can never tell where speed traps are, these days.’

- One can also substitute for the personal pronoun I, as in, ‘One never has enough time to see all the films being shown at city cinemas.’ However, one should be used with great caution in this role or one can risk sounding like an imitater of the royal family!

- To sum up: use ‘one’ as a substitute for the average person with confidence, but be careful about the second form of use, as a substitute for I. It can sound elegant in some contexts, but it may sound pretentious and pompous in others. Don’t use ‘one’ in academic writing.

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Possessive pronouns

There are **two main types** of possessive pronouns:

- **Adjectival possessive pronouns** (also a kind of determiner, because they tell us more about following nouns): *my* lecture notes, *his* jacket, *our* motor car, *your* house, *their* party.

- **Pronominal possessive pronouns** which are used on their own: that textbook is *mine*; *yours* is over there; *his* is under the table; *hers* is lying on the bottom stair; this land is *ours*; *theirs* is down the road.
Reflexive pronouns

- Reflexive pronouns ‘reflect’ the action back to the self or subject: **myself, yourself, herself, himself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves** — for example, we often say ‘Look after yourself’ to people we care about.

- Sometimes, reflexive pronouns are used in an **intensifying** or clarifying way. For instance: ‘The funeral, featuring hymns the dead man **himself** had selected, took too long’; ‘Although the house **itself** was in good condition, its outbuildings were falling down.’

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Demonstrative pronouns

- These pronouns help us ‘to demonstrate something or to point out things’ (King, p.85).

- Examples: ‘This chicken dish looks delicious’; ‘Those rocks look too dangerous for fishing’; ‘These clothes are too warm for a sunny day.’

- When demonstrative pronouns are used on their own, as in ‘That is not fair!’ it is very important that the listener or reader knows what is being referred to.

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Interrogative pronouns:

- who, what, which, whose, whom.

Examples:
- **What** time is it?
- **Who** is the woman wearing the yellow scarf?
- **Which** room is mine?
- **Whose** bicycle was stolen?

**Whom** is tricky, and is falling into disuse because many people do not know how to use it correctly. **Who** is a subject pronoun, while **whom** is an **object pronoun**; it should only be used as the object of a verb – e.g. ‘To **whom** shall I address the parcel?’, ‘By **whom** was the letter sent?’, ‘**Whom** shall I ask?’

If you’re not sure which of **who** and **whom** to use, choose **who**.
Relative pronouns

- That, which, who, whom, whose, whatever, whoever, whomever.
- Relative pronouns are used to introduce relative clauses.

Examples:
- I wish I knew whose shoes had made the carpet so muddy.
- The suit that she wore to the wedding was ruined by the rain.
- Newcastle buses, which usually run on time, terminate near the station.
- We’re going on a picnic to the beach next weekend, whatever the weather is like.
- The mayor, who had once been a leading businesswoman, was accused of corruption.
- The assault victim had nobody to whom to turn for help.
- Whoever caused the company’s bankruptcy should be held responsible.
- He should make reparation to whomever his crimes have affected.

* That is used to introduce what we call a **definitional relative clause** — a clause that provides an essential piece of information about a noun. For example: I want you to cut down the tree that hangs over the back fence.

* Which is used to introduce a **non-definitional clause** — in other words, a clause adding extra information not essential to understanding the main idea of the sentence. For example: He bought the Porsche, which everybody knows he can’t afford, last month.
That & which – what a dilemma!

Let’s immediately revise this important rule:

- **That** is used to introduce what we call a **definitional relative clause** — a clause that provides an essential piece of information about a noun.

- **Which** is used to introduce a **non-definitional clause** — in other words, a clause that adds extra information unnecessary to the understanding of the main idea of the sentence.

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Indefinite pronouns

- All, any, every, everything, each, some, one, both, either, neither, few, little, less, least, many, everyone, someone, no one, something, anybody, nobody, more, most, nothing, enough, plenty, several.

  (King, p. 89)

- What do they have in common? They all concern number or quantity.
Indefinite pronouns continued:

- Some indefinite pronouns should only be applied to *uncountable nouns*, because they concern *portions* rather than numbers of something: *a little* sugar, *much* trouble, *less* fat. *(Remember that when indefinite pronouns precede nouns like this, they are actually called indefinite determiners.)*

- But, we say *many* cakes, *many* problems, *fewer* calories. *Many* and *fewer* are used to indicate *number* and so are used with *countable nouns*.

- Make sure that pronouns agree in grammatical number (singular or plural) with any nouns to which they may refer. For instance, *each, one, either, neither, someone, anyone, no one, nobody* and *something* are all singular.

- Make sure that an indefinite pronoun agrees in number with a verb or personal pronoun in a sentence – e.g. ‘*Each (singular)* one of us *has (singular)* problems’; ‘*Neither (sing.)* of the actors could remember *her (sing.)* lines,’ but ‘*Few (plural)* of the players *are (plural)* likely to turn up on such a cold day.’ *(King, p. 89)*

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Reciprocal pronouns

- There are only two *reciprocal pronouns*: *each other* and *one another*. As the term ‘reciprocal’ indicates, they express a mutual, give-and-take relationship.

- *Each other* refers to two people or things — e.g. ‘The brothers are no longer talking to *each other*.’

- *One another* is usually meant to refer to more than two — e.g. ‘The people of the small community helped *one another* through family crises.’
References:


**Practice resource:**