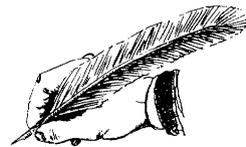


Be Sure Pronouns and Antecedents Agree

Pronouns are convenient. They are simple words that take the place of nouns that would otherwise have to be repeated. When speaking of oneself (so-called first person), the meaning of a pronoun such as "I," "me," and "we" is clear without stating the noun that the pronoun represents. The same is true of the person spoken to (you, your), the so-called second person. In contrast, when a pronoun represents the person or thing spoken about (so-called third person), then the noun is usually mentioned once, and a pronoun takes its place if it is to be mentioned again. Problems arise with pronouns in the third person when the noun referred to (the antecedent) is unclear, vague, ambiguous, or even absent. We do not treat our readers fairly if we expect them to figure out the meaning of unclear pronouns.



Knowledge of the subject can sometimes help the reader decipher the meaning of ambiguous antecedents. Consider the sentence, "Glyphosate injures alfalfa less when it is infested with dodder than when it is not." From the standpoint of sentence structure, "it" could mean either "glyphosate" or "alfalfa." Knowledge of herbicides and plants indicates that "alfalfa" is the intended antecedent. Nevertheless, the sentence would probably be better if written "Glyphosate injures dodder-infested alfalfa less than dodder-free alfalfa." The sentence "Plants in the centers of the beds had few tillers, whereas they were abundant on the borders" has four plural nouns to which "they" might refer. The reader should not have to waste time deciding that "they" refers to "tillers."

Knowledge of the subject sometimes cannot resolve ambiguity, as in the sentence, "Fungi injure roots when they are growing rapidly." Whether "they" refers to "fungi" or "roots" is not evident, because both fungi and roots can grow rapidly. This sentence could be written "When fungi are growing rapidly, they injure roots," or "When roots are growing rapidly, fungi injure them," depending on which meaning was intended. The same problem exists in the sentence "The weeds competed with the crop plants before they died." Does "they" refer to weeds or crop plants?

Sometimes the ambiguity is deceptive and can convey the wrong meaning. In the sentence, "White asparagus results from a lack of light that inhibits development of chloroplasts," "light" seems to be the antecedent for "that." Actually, the antecedent is "lack."

Sentences may be written so the antecedent for the pronoun is vague. The pronoun "it" is sometimes used where a vaguely implied antecedent must be inferred, such as in the sentence, "If the seedlings in the test tubes were injured, it could only occur because the herbicide moved from the treated soil as a vapor." "Injury" must be inferred as the antecedent of "it." This sentence would be better written "Seedlings in the test tubes could be injured only if the herbicide moved from the treated soil as a vapor."

In similar manner, the pronoun "this" sometimes is the first word of a sentence, and refers vaguely to something in the preceding sentence. Consider: "The first internode, which is the structure responsible for most of the elongation of an emerging barnyardgrass seedling, was frequently kinked into a zigzag pattern in EPTC-injured plants. This was a secondary effect of the herbicide." The antecedent for "this" is assumed to be "kinking," but that word had never been used. In this case, a pronoun should not be used, and the second sentence should be "Kinking was a secondary effect of the herbicide."

The relative pronoun "which" must have a clear antecedent. The following sentence is not acceptable: "Without mechanical incorporation, the herbicide evaporates, which results in poor weed control." There is no antecedent for "which." An alternative wording could be "Without mechanical incorporation, the herbicide evaporates and does not control weeds effectively."

Rules of grammar require that pronouns agree in number with their antecedents. "The movement and distribution of EPTC were similar to that of vernolate" is not correct, because the antecedent is plural, and "that" is singular. "That" should be changed to "those."

Remember:

- Pronouns are useful little words;
- For correct use here's the key;
- Pronoun and antecedent
- Always must agree.

J. H. Dawson, U.S. Dep. Agric., ARS, Prosser, WA 99350