

## Pronoun and Antecedent Agreement

Like subjects that agree with verbs and nouns that agree with other nouns, pronouns must agree in gender, person, and number with their antecedent. Gender agreement (*the man lost his wallet*) and person agreement (*If one is hungry, one may eat*) are not tested on the GMAT, but number agreement is a common error, appearing in many questions in *The Official Guide to GMAT Review*.

A singular antecedent must employ a singular pronoun:

The girl mailed her application.  
Owen thought he deserved a raise.  
The dog chases its tail.

A plural antecedent must use a plural pronoun:

The girls won their game.  
The children wonder what they might be when they grow up.

Compound antecedents must also receive plural antecedents:

Grace and Hakim are proud of themselves.  
Although Harry, Ron, and Hermione are fictional, they come to life in the book.

As with other areas of agreement, GMAC will put distance between the antecedent and the pronoun so that you might fail to notice that they don't agree. The test makers will also use singular and plural nouns in between, hoping you'll incorrectly choose one of them as the antecedent. Look at an example:

While the definition of Generation X is hotly debated concerning the age ranges of its members, culturists generally agree that they describe a group of adults that are self-focused, cynical, and skeptical. [Incorrect]

In this sentence, there are five nouns—*definition*, *Generation X*, *age ranges*, *members*, and *culturists*—preceding the word *they*, so it is hard to spot the real antecedent, which is *definition*. To paraphrase, the sentence states “*The definition is hotly debated but it describes a group.*” Since *definition* is singular, it needs the pronoun *it*, rather than *they*. Notice that the correction of the pronoun also means a correction to the verb *describe*, in order to achieve subject verb agreement with the new pronoun:

While the *definition* of Generation X is hotly debated concerning the age ranges of its members, culturists generally agree that *it describes* a group of adults that are self-focused, cynical, and skeptical. [Correct]

If you find a pronoun in a sentence, immediately identify the antecedent.

The GMAT has two other pronoun agreement tricks up its computer-generated sleeve: indefinite pronouns and misleading words used as antecedents. These sentences will test your ability to determine what sounds correct versus what is correct.

Just as indefinite pronouns can cause havoc with subject and verb agreement, they also meddle with pronoun and antecedent agreement. The indefinite pronouns *anyone*, *anybody*, *each*, *everyone*, *everybody*, *someone*, *somebody*, *no one*, and *nobody* are always singular antecedents on the GMAT. This is often confusing to students who think of *everybody* and *everyone* as a large group of people. However, look at the roots of the words: *body* and *one*. They are singular. Look for errors with these words and a plural pronoun on the GMAT:

Everyone of the soldiers reported that they had completed the training exercise prior to the incident, although the lieutenant claimed several members of the squadron were not present. [Incorrect]

In this sentence, *everyone* is the antecedent, thus it is singular. However, the pronoun reference, *they*, is plural. Look at the correction:

*Everyone* of the soldiers reported that *he or she* had completed the training exercise prior to the incident, although the lieutenant claimed several members of the squadron were not present. [Correct]

Similarly, *few*, *many*, and *several* are plural antecedents, so watch for singular pronouns which do not agree with them:

A few of the nurses from the emergency room were disgruntled to learn that he or she had been moved to another area of the hospital due to the budget crisis. [Incorrect]

The word *few* is always plural, so its pronoun stand-in must also be plural:

A *few* of the nurses from the emergency room were disgruntled to learn that *they* had been moved to another area of the hospital due to the budget crisis. [Correct]

The final pronoun agreement error occurs with the use of misleading words. The makers of the GMAT will use singular antecedents that sound plural, such as *army* or *citrus*, and plural antecedents that sound singular, such as *cacti* or *persons*. Combine one of these misleading words with an improper pronoun, and you have a perfect GMAT sentence:

With the release of their fifth album, *Hotel California*, the band explored the pursuit of the American dream when accompanied by the loss of innocence and the presence of temptations. [Incorrect]

This sentence might sound acceptable to you. However, *band* is a singular antecedent, so *their* is incorrectly used. The sentence can be amended two ways:

With the release of *their* fifth album, *Hotel California*, the *members* of the band explored the pursuit of the American dream when accompanied by the loss of innocence and the presence of temptations. [Correct]

Or:

With the release of *its* fifth album, *Hotel California*, the *band* explored the pursuit of the American dream when accompanied by the loss of innocence and the presence of temptations. [Correct]

On test day, if you are given a sentence containing a pronoun, immediately identify the antecedent and look for agreement between the two. If they are in agreement, look for another error in the sentence. However, if they disagree, begin searching for the answer choices that correct the error—this can save you valuable time!