

Common Error K: Vague or Ambiguous Pronoun (vague/amb)


Reminder: A pronoun takes the place of a noun (or another pronoun). That noun is called its *antecedent*.

Principle: A pronoun must refer clearly and logically to a specific noun antecedent.

Problem: Confusion occurs when the writer fails to make a clear relationship between a pronoun and its antecedent.

K1. vague (indefinite)

Rule: Vague (indefinite) pronoun reference occurs when the pronoun has no definite, stated antecedent. A pronoun such as *this*, *which*, and *it* must have a specific noun antecedent. A pronoun cannot refer to an entire clause.

error: s lv 
Mike is usually courteous, *which* pleases his teachers.
analysis: The pronoun *which* refers to the adjective *courteous*. It is not *the courteous* which pleases the teachers. It is the *courtesy*, a noun, which pleases them.
correct: s av
Mike's usual *courtesy* pleases his teachers.

Notice that the revised sentence is not only more clear but also more succinct and more active.

error: s av
Mom bakes brownies every week, and we love *it*.
analysis: The pronoun *it* refers not to a single noun antecedent but to the idea of baking brownies. A pronoun cannot refer to a general idea. A helpful way to revise this kind of sentence is to ask yourself, "What does *it* stand for?" and then to put that word or phrase into the sentence.
correct: We love Mom's weekly homemade brownies.
correct: We love Mom's baking brownies every week.
correct: Mom bakes brownies every week, a gesture we love.

Recognizing K1:

- K. Vague or Ambiguous Pronoun
- K1. vague
- C. Correct Sentence

- _____ 1. Many young people have left Hillsdale to work in the city, which is unfortunate for the town.
- _____ 2. Every time a circus comes to the park, Alice wants to join them.
- _____ 3. On television it said that another earthquake had struck Italy.
- _____ 4. I appreciate your writing the compliment, which encouraged me to practice more.
- _____ 5. Alicia took her brother Frankie to the ball game, and Frankie liked this very much.

K2. ambiguous

Rule: Ambiguous reference occurs when a pronoun refers to two different antecedents. A pronoun must have one specific noun antecedent.

error: Elaine's aunt told her that *she* needs a vacation.
analysis: The pronoun *she* is ambiguous: Does *she* refer to *Elaine* or to Elaine's *aunt*?
correct: Elaine's aunt said that she needs a vacation.

- correct: Elaine's aunt said that Elaine needs a vacation.
 correct: Elaine's aunt said, "Elaine, you need a vacation."
 correct: Elaine's aunt said, "Elaine, I need a vacation."
- error: One of the women told her boss that *she* valued neatness.
 analysis: The pronoun *she* is ambiguous: Does *she* refer to *one of the women* or to the *boss*?
 correct: One of the women told her boss that her boss valued neatness.
 correct: One of the women said to her boss, "I value neatness."
 correct: One of the women said to her boss, "You value neatness."

Note that in correcting an ambiguous sentence, you may need to interpret what the writer *could* mean. In your own writing, your responsibility is to be so clear that your reader does not have to figure out what you probably mean.

Recognizing K2:

- K. Vague or Ambiguous Pronoun
 K2. ambiguous
 C. Correct Sentence

- _____ 1. Mrs. Smith smiled at Mrs. Jones when she was awarded the cup.
 _____ 2. I heard the owl hoot from a nearby tree, but I couldn't see it.
 _____ 3. My father told my uncle that he did not remember that childhood incident accurately.
 _____ 4. My brothers sold chickens when they were six months old.
 _____ 5. Sal remarked to Antonio that Antonio had left his book bag on the bench.

Recognizing K1-K2:

- K. Vague or Ambiguous Pronoun
 K1. vague
 K2. ambiguous
 C. Correct Sentence

- _____ 1. The small print on the insurance policy said that they were not responsible for loss due to flood.
 _____ 2. The motorist passed the red light, for which the policeman gave him a ticket.
 _____ 3. Just as they were ready to eat lunch, Dave told his dad that his car needed new spark plugs.
 _____ 4. The chef worked hard, but it made him neither rich nor happy.
 _____ 5. Mary told Jill that she had received a letter of commendation.
 _____ 6. I would rather play chess than a video game because it is more challenging.
 _____ 7. The child is always truthful, which is a quality everyone admires.
 _____ 8. They sell insurance in Hartford, Connecticut.
 _____ 9. Bill loaned his notes to Tom because Tom was getting extra help from a tutor.
 _____ 10. Our goalie ran toward their shooter just as she was preparing for a winning kick.

What is Passive Voice?

Voice indicates whether a subject is acting or is acted upon. English uses two voices: active and passive.

A subject in the *active* voice does something: Donald cuts the paper into strips.
A subject in the *passive* voice receives the action: The paper is cut into strips by Donald.

The **passive voice** always is formed by *be*, plus a past participle. Examples: *is read, has been studied, will be reported, had been seen.*

Summary: A verb may be *active* or *passive*, depending on whether the subject is *doing* the action (active voice) or *receiving* the action (passive voice). For example,

active: Jon hit the ball. Jon is *doing* something: He is *hitting* the ball.
passive: The ball was hit by Jon. The ball is *receiving* something: It is sitting in the air, receiving the *hit* that Jon swings at it.

Practice with passive voice: In each sentence, identify the verb and subject and determine whether the verb is in the active voice or passive voice. Write out the correct answer, *active voice* or *passive voice*, on the line.

- _____ 1. The car was given a good cleaning by Phil and his brother.
- _____ 2. Sue Ellen found the notebook in her gym locker.
- _____ 3. Fresh coffee was made daily by the beverage service workers.
- _____ 4. Strawberries are picked in June.
- _____ 5. My neighbor assembled a huge swing set in his back yard.
- _____ 6. The swing set is used every afternoon and evening.

Active vs. Passive Voice: Keep in mind that effective writing uses action verbs in the active voice. Sophisticated writers use linking verbs and the passive voice sparingly and purposefully.

The **active voice** is more direct, more concise, and more dynamic than the passive voice. Use the active voice unless you have a reason to choose passive.

The **passive voice** is useful in limited ways, including the following:
emphasis: *The coach will not be forced to accept every applicant.*
tact: *It was felt that the plan was written in haste.*
convenience: *The dishes must be washed immediately.* (This construction avoids *you must.*)
convenience: *The door was opened by the usher, who ignored the spectators and spoke so loudly we couldn't hear the actors.* (This construction permits the writer to elaborate on the last word of the main clause, *usher.*)

Challenge: For better writing, revise your sentences to remove *it, this, that.*

The pronouns *it, this, that* can be vague or ambiguous. Worse, *it, this, that* are overused: they are quick 'n easy substitutes for what the writer really means. Sentences improve when the writer uses specific nouns instead of weak

pronouns. Rewrite the following sentences to remove *it*, *this*, and *that*. Hint: Ask yourself, “This *what*? That *what*? What do I mean by *it*?”

1. If only Liz had been here, it wouldn’t have happened.
2. I knew Leon was wrong, but I didn’t say this.
3. Our walks to the lake are short, but my dog Tikker never seems to tire of it.
4. Love makes the impossible a reality; people gain strength because of that.
5. It was a special moment when the bride received a red rose from the groom’s family.

Effective writing uses specific nouns. Sophisticated writers use pronouns sparingly. Write or find your own paragraph of about 150 words. Revise the paragraph to remove *all* pronouns, including *I*, *me*, *you*, *him*, *her*, *we*, *us*, and *them*. Look in particular for *this*, *that*, and *it* used as pronouns. Ask yourself, “This *what*? That *what*? What do I mean by *it*?”

Challenge: Writing without the verb to be

For better writing, revise to remove forms of the verb *to be*. Forms of *to be* can be lazy linkers and can accompany the dull passive voice. Sentences carry clarity and power when the writer uses action verbs in the active voice instead of linking verbs and passive voice. Rewrite the following sentences to remove *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, or *been*. Hint: Ask yourself, “Who or what is *doing* something? What is the subject *doing*? Whom or what is the sentence talking about?”

1. Why Harry tricked Sean into giving up his MP3 player *cannot be understood*.
2. Ghandi *is* the world leader whom I most admire.
3. The afternoon on the beach *was* hot.
4. There will be consequences for spectators who boo the visiting team.
5. Your contribution to the peace fund has been received at the central office.

Write or find your own paragraph of about 150 words. Revise the paragraph to remove all forms of *to be*. Look in particular for *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were*. Ask yourself, “Who or what is *doing* something? What is *happening* in this sentence?”

Remember that the *only* time to use a passive voice or a linking verb is when you deliberately choose it in preference to an active verb/active voice.

Writing tips: Students, teachers, and writers request ways to improve their writing. Two revision techniques that make prose clear and vivid are to use

- specific nouns instead of pronouns (*it*, *this*, *that*, *these* are vague, confusing, and/or dull)
- lively action verbs instead of dull linking and passive verbs.

You will be amazed at how lucid and powerful your writing becomes when you train your pen to avoid pronouns, linking verbs, and passives.