

To avoid repetition of nouns, writers use **pronouns** as substitutes for nouns already named. Make sure that pronouns refer to something specific and that what they refer to cannot be misunderstood. Here is an example of unclear **pronoun reference**:

Smithall (2011) sees many applications for this, but additional research needs to be completed before it is clear.

What exactly do *this* and *it* stand for in the sentence above? We can revise this sentence to use specific nouns:

Smithall (2011) saw many applications for this new diabetes drug, but additional research needs to be completed before the effects of this drug are clear.

Pronoun Tips

1. **Double check your use of *which*, *that*, and *who*.** Readers usually associate a pronoun with the noun closest to it.

The subjects used a food diary app to track their food intake for a month, which they were able to download on their phones (Johnson, 2015).

Which is closest to *month* but actually refers back to *app*. Recast the sentence:

The subject used a food diary app, which they were able to download to their phones, to track their food intake for a month (Johnson, 2015).

2. **Avoid the Great Unnamed.**

It was not revealed why only women were included in the trial.

It seems not to refer to anybody or anything in the sentence. (Actually, *it* refers to the entire phrase *why only women were included in the study*, making its use redundant.) Recast the sentence:

The authors did not reveal why they had included only women in the trial.

3. **Avoid personal pronouns. Never use *you* in academic writing. Never use *we/us* or *they/them* unless those pronouns refer to specific individuals.**

We know that insulin levels rise when women with insulin resistance consume artificial sweeteners (Johnson, 2015).

Who is the *we* in the sentence above? The writer is including himself and some unspecified others. The use of *we* creates another rhetorical problem: by including all readers, the writer ensures that *somebody* will disagree. Using *we* to mean *everyone* challenges someone to disagree, thereby creating the opposite effect intended.

You can use the pronoun "I" when you describe your methods (or "we" if you have coauthors). The APA addresses the issue on p. 69 under two headings: "Third person" and "Editorial we."