Noun and Pronoun Agreement

I/Me

Wrong: If your mother needs help, ask Jack and **I** to do the job, and we will do it well.

Right: If your mother needs help, ask Jack and **me** to do the job, and we will do it well.

Explanation: One would not say, "If your mother asks 'I' to do the job," so don't say, "ask Jack and I." If one gets confused, remove the other person from the sentence, and it will become clearer.

Everyone/Their

Wrong: When looking over the first research papers, I see that **everyone** got **their** works cited page wrong.

Right: When looking over the first research papers, I see that **everyone** got **his or her** works cited page wrong.

Right: I see that all the **students** got **their** works cited page wrong.

Explanation: By definition, "everyone" is "one," and "their" is more than "one." Consequently, *everyone* cannot be *their*; *everyone* must be either "his," "her," or "his or her." Also "students" can be "their" since both are more than one.

Theirself/themselves

Wrong: Bob and Mary believed they could change the tire **theirself**.

Right: Bob and Mary believed they could change the tire **themselves**.

Explanation: There are two problems here. First, Bob and Mary are two people, so they would have to be "selves" and not just "self." Second, "theirselves" is considered grammatically incorrect or "non-standard," though in contrast "myself" is right, and "meself" is definitely wrong.

Finding the Proper Pronoun

Pronouns

Pronouns are words that *take the place of nouns* in order to make a passage less wordy or less repetitive.

For example, rather than saying "Mark Jackson likes ice cream because ice cream has so many flavors," it would sound better to say "**I** like ice cream because **it** has so many flavors."

Of course, there are times when a noun is necessary and should not be replaced by a pronoun, as in this sentence: "Tom told Bill that *he* was not ready for prime time." Did Tom mean that "Tom" or "Bill" was not ready? Only a noun (Tom or Bill) where the pronoun "he" is will clear up the confusion.

Depending on whom they refer to, personal pronouns can be grouped in three categories:

- **1st person** (the writer): I/me/my, we/us/our

- **2nd person** (the reader): you/your

- **3rd person** (the topic): he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/their

This brochure will help you decide when to use which pronoun category in your writing.

1st Person (the writer): I/me/my, we/us/our

First person is the perfect pronoun for writers to use when referring to themselves. The "I" pronoun is appropriate when writing a memoir, an autobiography, an opinion piece, or directions.

- I remember my first trip to our nation's capital.
- I began my studies at IU Southeast when I was eighteen.
- In my opinion the price of gasoline is too high.
- I expect all work to be turned in on time.

It is possible to write opinions or give directions without saying "I":

- The price of gasoline is too high.
- All work is to be turned in on time.

However, the reader might then ask "says who?"

Professors disagree over whether the first person pronoun may be used in the introduction or conclusion of a research paper. Some maintain it is alright to explain why you chose a topic in the introduction or to give your opinion in the conclusion, but others believe it is always better to keep a more formal tone by not using "I" or if necessary for clarity by referring to oneself as "this researcher" or "this writer."

2nd Person (the reader): you/your

The informal, familiar pronoun "you" is appropriate for personal letters or e-mails and when giving directions:

- How are you feeling today?
- You must double space your papers.

The pronoun "you" has no place in a formal college essay or research paper because the word refers to the reader who is usually a professor.

Wrong: When **you** are pregnant, **you** sometimes experience strange food cravings.

Right: When **women** are pregnant, **they** sometimes experience strange food cravings.

Explanation: Remember that when the reader sees the word "you," the reader thinks it refers to the reader. Don't assume that the reader is a pregnant woman. It is better to not use "you" in formal writing or speaking.

3rd Person (the topic): he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/their

In academic or college writing, most formal essays and research reports use third person pronouns and do not use "I" or "you."

Essays

An essay is the writer's analysis about a topic. The essay is based on the writer's ideas and experience, not on other sources of information the writer has researched.

"You" has no place in an essay since the essay is the writer's thoughts and not the reader's thoughts. When the writer uses "you," the writer is telling the reader what the reader thinks, which is not appropriate, especially when the reader is usually the writer's professor.

Using "I" in an essay is not wrong, but it is unnecessary. The reader can safely assume that the ideas in the essay are by the writer since the writer's name is on the paper. Saying "I believe it is warmer this year" is correct, but it is more appropriate to just say "It is warmer this year." Since there is no other source in the essay, the reader knows that the ideas are the writer's without the writer continually saying "I."

Research Reports

A research report is the writer's analysis of other people's ideas. A research paper is based on outside sources that are credited by mentioning the name of the author of a source in the relevant paragraphs in either of two ways:

- Smith believes that it is warmer this year. He argues that …
- Records for the past decade show it is warmer this year (Smith).

If a passage is not credited with a source, then the reader may correctly assume that it is the writer's thoughts even though the writer does not use the pronoun "I":

- It is warmer this year (Smith). This statement seems clear at first, but there are no records of temperatures in prehistoric times.