

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns. Consider the following sentences:

*Jill watched **her** favorite movie.*

In this example, the pronoun “her” takes the place of Jill’s name.

*Pat walked **his** dog.*

In this example, the pronoun “his” takes the place of Pat’s name.

*The doctors found **their** stethoscopes.*

In this example, the pronoun “their” takes the place of the doctors’ names.

Because pronouns replace nouns, when using pronouns, those pronouns need to agree in number, in gender, and in person with the nouns they represent. This is demonstrated in the following two sentences:

*A **magician** should always bring **their** magic hat.*

This sentence can be confusing because **a magician** refers to one person, but **their** refers to more than one person. This pronoun does not agree in number.

*A **magician** should always bring **his** magic hat.*

This sentence now agrees in number, but it could be offensive because **a magician** could be male or female. **His** does not agree in gender.

This is better:

*A **magician** should always bring **his or her** magic hat.*

While this sentence now has correct pronoun agreement in both number and gender, using “his or her” can be distracting, especially if the sentence continued with something like “because he/she can never know when he/she will be called upon to demonstrate his/her magic.” As a result, it’s often best to use a plural noun—as in the second sentence—when referring to groups that may include both genders.

***Magicians** should always bring **their** magic hats.*

*Thanksgiving is **my** favorite holiday because **you** never know what yummy tasting food will be served.*

This sentence can be misleading because it changes from “my” favorite holiday to “you” never know. This pronoun does not agree in person. To be more precise, “I” is a first person pronoun, and “you” is a second person pronoun.

In addition, second person “you” pronouns should be used with extra care because sometimes the “you” may not apply to your reader(s). For example, in this case, what if some of your readers do know what “yummy tasting food will be served” because their Thanksgiving traditions even include the same exact foods? Then, the “you” in this sentence would not make sense to them.

Also keep in mind that many times when we write “you,” we actually mean “I.” If we truly mean “I,” we should say “I.” That is much clearer communication!

To correct these errors, the sentence should read like this:

*Thanksgiving is **my** favorite holiday because **I** never know what yummy tasting food will be served.*

Writer's Tip: Many writers struggle with whether to use "I" or "me" in some situations. If Sarah went to the store with you and Lou, which of the following would you say?

1. *Sarah went to the store with Lou and I.*
2. *Sarah went to the store with Lou and me.*

The correct answer is sentence number two. If you're in doubt, a quick way to check is to take the other person's name out of the sentence and see which one sounds right:

- *Sarah went to the store with I.*
- *Sarah went to the store with me.*

Good luck as you focus on using pronouns correctly in your writing!