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Ambiguous Pronoun Reference

Name _____
Date _____

As you probably know, a pronoun takes the place of a noun. But have you ever thought about why? Pronouns keep us from saying things like: Jelena picked up Jelena’s notebook and put it on Jelena’s desk next to Jelena’s pencil. Instead we say: Jelena picked up her notebook and put it on her desk next to her pencil.

So pronouns are handy—but they’re also a little tricky. If they aren’t used just right, they can become *ambiguous*. In other words, it’s hard to tell which nouns the pronouns are taking the place of. Read the following example. See if you can spot the ambiguous pronoun reference.

Example

Mr. Sanchez moved the couch out of the living room before cleaning it.

What’s being cleaned here—the couch or the living room? It’s ambiguous. Here’s another:

Example

Danielle told her sister she was getting a new car.

Who’s the lucky girl—Danielle or her sister? Again, it’s ambiguous.

Fixing ambiguous pronoun references usually involves revising the sentence. Read these revisions of the previous examples.

Revisions

Mr. Sanchez moved the couch out of the living room before he cleaned the couch.

After removing the couch from the living room, Mr. Sanchez cleaned the room.

Revisions

Danielle told her sister Julie that Julie was getting a new car.

Danielle told her sister, “I’m getting a new car!”

To avoid ambiguous pronoun references as you write, each time you use a pronoun, check to make sure its reference is clear. Just because you know what nouns your pronouns are replacing doesn’t mean your audience knows.

Directions

Each of the sentences below contains an ambiguous pronoun reference. Revise each as necessary.

- Abdul removed his new CD player from the box and then threw it away.

- Police officers should be careful how they carry their guns when they are loaded.

- While Ted and Jarron cleaned the interiors of the cars, the other students hosed them down.

- Tahj should worry about his brother, but he should worry about himself first.

- If your kids won’t eat raw vegetables, try steaming them.

Dangling Modifiers

Name _____

Date _____

A *modifier* gives additional information about, or *modifies*, a word or group of words. For example, instead of saying *Selina heard the tornado sirens*, you might say *Shortly after going to bed, Selina heard the tornado sirens go off*. The modifier *Shortly after going to bed* tells readers *when* and *where* Selina heard the sirens go off.

Modifiers can make your writing clearer, but they must be used correctly. A *dangling modifier* is an example of an incorrectly used modifier. A dangling modifier does not sensibly modify anything in a sentence. Here is the same sentence from above reworded so that the modifier is dangling.

Example

Shortly after going to bed, the tornado sirens went off.

Since when do tornado sirens go to bed?

Dangling modifiers occur most often at the beginnings of sentences. Because these modifying phrases have no subject, readers automatically apply them to the nearest noun, which is usually the subject of the main clause. This can result in some

pretty ridiculous sentences, like the one above. You can correct a dangling modifier by simply recasting the sentence it's in. As you read the examples below, notice how the dangling modifier was corrected in the revisions.

Example

Peeking out the window, the blossoming apple tree could be seen.

Revisions

Peeking out the window, Chloe could see the blossoming apple tree.

The blossoming apple tree could be seen by anyone peeking out the window.

Example

Though still in the hospital, a birthday party was held for Ken.

Revisions

Though Ken was still in the hospital, a birthday party was held for him.

Though Ken was still in the hospital, he had a birthday party.

Directions

In the sentences below, add, subtract, or rearrange words to eliminate the dangling modifiers. Each item has more than one possible answer.

1. Rusting and needing a new coat of paint, Mr. Yamada made an appointment for his car at the body shop.

2. After unlocking the door, the cat changed its mind and refused to go out.

3. While jumping on the trampoline, the idea suddenly struck me.

4. To make a good impression, the right car is a must.

5. Standing in the shower, the hot water felt wonderful.
