

Vague Pronouns and Unclear Antecedents

Name: _____

Date: _____

Score: _____ / 10



Quick Review

Every pronoun (he, she, it, they, this, that, which) needs a CLEAR antecedent — one specific noun the reader can point to. A pronoun is vague when (1) it could refer to two different nouns, (2) it has no antecedent at all ('They say it will rain' — who is they?), or (3) 'this' or 'that' refers to a whole idea instead of a noun. Fix by replacing the pronoun with a specific noun or by rewriting.

PRACTICE

Choose the correct answer for each question.

- Which sentence contains a VAGUE pronoun?
 - After Mr. Lopez gave Anna the book, she opened it eagerly.
 - After Tara called Megan, she said she would come to the party.
 - After Tara called Megan, Megan said she would come to the party.
 - After the doorbell rang, my brother opened the front door.
- Read this sentence: 'In the article, it says that polar bears are losing their habitat.' Why is this sentence unclear?
 - The verb 'says' should be 'said'.
 - There are too many prepositional phrases.
 - The pronoun 'their' has no antecedent.
 - The pronoun 'it' has no clear antecedent — articles don't 'say' things, and 'it' refers to nothing specific.
- Which revision FIXES the vague pronoun? 'Jamal told his brother that he had won the contest.'
 - Jamal told his brother, "I won the contest!"
 - Jamal told his brother that they had won the contest.
 - Jamal told his brother that the contest had won him.
 - Jamal told him that he had won the contest.
- Which sentence has a clear antecedent for every pronoun?
 - When Aisha unpacked the suitcase, it was a mess.
 - Diego watched the squirrel chase the chipmunk until it climbed a tree.
 - They are predicting a snowstorm for next Tuesday.
 - When the bell rang, the students hurried to their lockers.



5. Which sentence uses 'this' in a vague way?
- A. I have read four chapters of the novel, and this is my favorite so far.
 - B. Our school just finished raising money for new computers, painting the cafeteria, and adding library books. This shows what we can do as a team.
 - C. After studying all weekend, I felt ready for this test on Monday.
 - D. Mia handed me a folded note. This was the third one she had sent that week.
6. Which revision removes the vague pronoun in this sentence? 'In the news report, they said the river is rising.'
- A. In the news report, it said the river is rising.
 - B. They said in the news report that the river is rising.
 - C. In the news report, the reporters said the river was rising.
 - D. The news report stated that the river is rising.
7. Which sentence has an UNCLEAR pronoun reference?
- A. Sara told her mom that she had locked the back door.
 - B. Sara told her mom, "I locked the back door."
 - C. Sara's mom said that Sara had locked the back door.
 - D. Sara locked the back door, and then she told her mom.
8. Which sentence needs revision because of a vague pronoun?
- A. The detectives examined the broken window and the muddy footprints. This was their first big clue.
 - B. The detectives examined the broken window and the muddy footprints. The footprints were their first big clue.
 - C. The detectives examined the broken window and the muddy footprints, and they were excited to follow the trail.
 - D. The detectives examined the muddy footprints and decided that they pointed toward the garden gate.
9. Read the sentence: 'When Coach told the captain about the new play, he was confused.' Which revision makes the meaning clearest?
- A. When Coach told him about the new play, he was confused.
 - B. When Coach explained the new play, the captain was confused.
 - C. When Coach told the captain about the new play, they were confused.
 - D. When the captain heard Coach talk about the new play, he was confused.
10. Rewrite this sentence to fix the vague pronoun. There is more than one possible correct answer. 'Maya told her sister that she had been chosen for the lead role in the play.'



Answer Keys

- 1 A B C D
- 2 A B C D
- 3 A B C D
- 4 A B C D
- 5 A B C D

- 6 A B C D
- 7 A B C D
- 8 A B C D
- 9 A B C D
- 10

Explanations

| | |
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| 1. B | In B, 'she' could refer to either Tara or Megan — the antecedent is ambiguous. A is clear: 'she' = Anna (the only female named); 'it' = the book. C fixes the ambiguity by repeating 'Megan'. D has only one possible antecedent for 'my brother'. |
| 2. D | 'It' has no real noun to refer to — articles do not speak, and no specific noun has been introduced as 'it'. The fix: 'The article reports that polar bears are losing their habitat.' A, B, and C are not the issue. 'Their' clearly refers to 'polar bears'. |
| 3. A | In the original, 'he' could be Jamal OR his brother. A uses direct quotation so the reader knows Jamal is talking about himself — clear. B changes the meaning to 'both of them won'. C scrambles the meaning. D replaces a noun with a pronoun and makes the sentence WORSE — two pronouns, no clear antecedent. |
| 4. D | D: 'their' clearly refers to 'students'. A's 'it' is unclear (was the SUITCASE a mess or the contents? Or the unpacking?). B's 'it' could be the squirrel OR the chipmunk. C's 'they' has no antecedent at all. |
| 5. B | In B, 'this' refers vaguely to a whole group of actions rather than a specific noun. Fix: 'This effort shows...' or 'These projects show...'. A's 'this' = 'chapter four' (clear from context). C's 'this test' is specific. D's 'this' = 'the folded note' (clear). |
| 6. D | 'They' has no antecedent — who is 'they'? D names the actual source ('the news report') and avoids any unclear pronoun. A swaps one vague pronoun for another ('it'). B keeps 'they'. C names 'reporters' but also shifts the tense unexpectedly to past 'was' — D is the cleaner fix. |
| 7. A | In A, 'she' could be Sara OR her mom — ambiguous. B uses direct speech so the speaker is clear. C names both people instead of using a pronoun. D introduces 'Sara' first, so 'she' clearly refers to Sara. |
| 8. C | In C, 'they' could refer to 'detectives' OR 'footprints' — ambiguous. A's 'this' is questionable but at least refers to a single observation; the answer focuses on the clearer case. B is unambiguous ('The footprints were...'). D's 'they' clearly refers to 'footprints' (detectives don't 'point toward the gate'). |
| 9. B | The pronoun 'he' could be Coach or the captain. B names the confused person directly. A replaces a noun with a pronoun — even worse. C changes the meaning to 'both were confused' and uses plural 'they' with no clear antecedent. D still leaves 'he' open to either person. |




10.

Answer: Maya told her sister, "I have been chosen for the lead role in the play." (Or: Maya told her sister that the sister had been chosen for the lead role in the play. Or: Maya had been chosen for the lead role in the play, and she told her sister.)
The pronoun 'she' is ambiguous — could be Maya or her sister. Accept any rewrite that names WHO was chosen so the reader is not guessing. Acceptable methods: direct quotation, repeating the proper noun, or restructuring the sentence. Mark wrong if the student keeps 'she' with no other clarifying noun, or if the rewrite introduces a new ambiguity ('they', 'her').



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