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PROBLEMS WITH PRONOUNS PART II: PERSONAL, REFLEXIVE, AND POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

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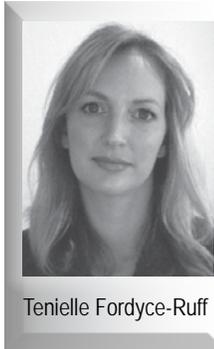
Pronouns do a lot of heavy lifting in English. They appear in most sentences and in virtually every paragraph. We throw them around casually in speech. But, when we write for a living, as we lawyers do, we need to be more careful about our pronoun usage.

In the March/April 2012 edition of *The Advocate*, I addressed the problems created when pronouns and their antecedents don't match. There are other pesky pronoun problems lurking out there. This round, I will address specific types of pronouns — personal, reflexive, and possessive and how to use them correctly.

Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns replace people.

English is tricky because it has two sets of personal pronouns: nominative and objective. Nominative pronouns function as the subject of verbs (these pronouns do the action of the sentence): *I, you, she, he, it, we, and they*. Objective



pronouns function as the objects of verbs or prepositions (these pronouns are acted upon): *me, you, her, him, it, us, and them*.

Writers tend to get into trouble when they use objective pronouns to do the work of subjective pronouns. Interestingly, this happens often when using two pronouns joined by an “and.”

Him and me are going to court.

This sentence makes my eyes bleed. The writer is using two objective pronouns as the subject of the verb. Fortunately, there is no fancy rule you need to memorize that applies in this situation. You just need to see if the individual pronouns sound ok by themselves.

Him is going to court. (doesn't sound right)

Me is going to court. (doesn't sound right)

He is going to court. (sounds right)

I am going to court. (sounds right)

Now, avoid the pain-inducing example above by just combining the two pronouns that actually sound right, and make



sure the verb reflects that more than one person is involved:

He and I are going to court.

This same trick works to fix mistakes from two subjective pronouns trying to do the work of an objective pronoun.

The lawyer asked she and I several questions.

You wouldn't say

The lawyer asked she several questions.

The lawyer asked I several questions.

So, instead write:

The lawyer asked her and me several questions.

This last example seems to be particularly tricky for some. We all learned that to be polite, always refer to ourselves last. This “rule,” however, doesn't change the function of subjective and objective pronouns. You would never say, *Please send the schedule to I*, so don't say, *Please send the schedule to my partner and I*. Rather, *Please send the schedule to my partner and me*.

Reflexive pronouns

I slipped another type of pronoun at you in the last paragraph: *always refer to ourselves last*. Reflexive pronouns are the “self” pronouns: *myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, yourselves, and themselves*.

We can correctly use reflexive pronouns when we want to repeat a subject for emphasis. (For my fellow grammar noodges — this is sometimes called a reflexive-intensive pronoun.)

All we have to fear is fear itself.

The senator herself answered the phone.

The most common spelling error in the English language is including an apostrophe in “it’s” when you mean “belonging to it” rather than “it is.”

We also correctly use reflexive pronouns when the subject and the object of a sentence are the same (the doer and the receiver of the action are the same).

You must keep it to yourself.

She cut herself while filing papers.

I've really outdone myself.

They had to see it for themselves.

We cannot, however, correctly use a reflexive pronoun as a substitute for a personal pronoun. This is both incorrect and stuffy.

Incorrect: *Please send the schedule to myself.*

Correct: *Please send the schedule to me.*

Incorrect: *My partner and myself wrote a very persuasive brief.*

Correct: *My partner and I wrote a very persuasive brief.*

Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns are used to show ownership or attribution:

You must make your citations correct.

The possessive pronouns are *my*, *mine*, *your*, *yours*, *his*, *her*, *hers*, *its*, *our*, *ours*, *their*, and *theirs*. Notice that none of these pronouns have an apostrophe — the most common spelling error in the English language is including an apostrophe in “it’s” when you mean “belonging to it” rather than “it is.”

It’s important that the business receive its license.

Notice, too, that certain possessive pronouns have two forms: *my* and *mine*, *your* and *yours*, *her* and *hers*, *our* and *ours*, *their* and *theirs*. We have multiple forms to indicate the type of possessive: simple or absolute.

Simple possessive pronouns function as adjectives and are sometimes called possessive adjectives:

Have you seen her briefcase?

This is his response.

Give me my phone.

Absolute possessive pronouns, on the other hand, can stand alone and don’t need a noun following them:

That briefcase is hers.

That response was his.

This phone is mine.

Possessive pronouns can get tricky when we use gerunds (a gerund is an “-ing” verb that functions as a noun). Using an objective pronoun instead of a possessive pronoun can change the meaning of your sentence.

There is no use in your testifying. (Here, the testifying is useless, not you!)

There is no use in you testifying. (Here, you are useless.)

Possessive pronouns also get tricky when using a double genitive. This is when you use “of” plus a pronoun to indicate the pronoun is one of many in its class. Logically, you would use an objective pronoun in this instance. However, English is idiomatic and we use possessive pronouns instead of personal pronouns. So, to simplify: If you are using an “of” plus a pronoun, use an absolute possessive pronoun.

He was a client of mine. (Using “me” instead of “mine” would be a glaring error here.)

This questioning of yours is tiresome.

And that last example leads to my final word on possessive pronouns. When you use the double genitive, particularly with a *this*, *that*, *these*, or *those*, your construction will be intensifying and frequently take on a negative connotation.

Who could ever forget that riveting article on pronouns of hers?

Conclusion

Using pronouns — personal, reflexive, and possessive — can help your meaning shine through. Remember these few tricks and rules, and you will be well on your way to correct, concise legal writing.

About the Author

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