Avoiding Vague and Ambiguous Pronoun References

VOCABULARY

Antecedent
The noun which a pronoun substitutes for or refers to.

Ambiguous Pronoun Reference
A pronoun with multiple, possible antecedents.

Vague Pronoun Reference
A pronoun without a specific antecedent.

THE RULE
A pronoun must refer to a single noun, which acts as its antecedent.

PRACTICE Fixing Ambiguous Pronoun References

Error: When Samuel dropped the goblet onto the glass table, it broke. (What broke? The table or the goblet?)
Correction: The goblet broke when Samuel dropped it onto the glass table.

Error: Amy had an internship at Dell last summer; this will become her career. (What does “this” refer to?)
Correction: Amy had an internship at Dell last summer; this work will become her career.

PRACTICE Fixing Vague Pronoun References

Error: They should increase funding to academic programs. (Who is “they”?)
Correction: The administration should increase funding to academic programs.

Error: Sleeping eight hours a night is vital to the health of students, yet research clearly shows they simply don’t do it. (What is the antecedent of “it”?)
Correction: Although sleeping eight hours a night is vital to the health of students, research clearly shows they simply don’t sleep that much.