Pronoun Reference Error

As we all may already know, a pronoun (like *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, his, mine, yours, who, whom, that, which*) refers to a noun or another pronoun. The grammatical term for the word a pronoun refers to is antecedent. Every pronoun has a specific and clear antecedent, or, in other words, every pronoun has a specific and clear reference point. Let’s take a look at a few pronouns in action:

-“As she anguish over her novel, Pilar realized that she wouldn’t be able to finish it on time.”
  -The pronouns “her” and “she” have a specific and clear antecedent—“Pilar.”
  -The pronoun “it” has a specific and clear antecedent—“novel.”

-“With their eyes glazed over in a drowsy stupor, the students struggled to focus on the English professor’s tedious lecture.”
  -The pronoun “their” has a specific and clear antecedent—“students.”

-“Xavier, who had a habit of writing melodramatic essays, continually frustrated his English professor Nelson, who had the misfortune of reading them.”
  -The 1st pronoun “who” has a specific and clear antecedent—“Xavier.”
  *NOTE: pronouns are usually placed as close as possible to its antecedent.
  -The 2nd pronoun “who” has a specific and clear antecedent—“Nelson.”
  -The 3rd pronoun “them” has a specific and clear antecedent—“essays.”
  *NOTE: If the pronoun is plural, its antecedent must also be plural. Even though the pronoun “them” is placed far away from its antecedent, it’s clear that “them” refers to “essays” because they both agree in number.

It is fairly easy to figure out which pronoun refers to which antecedent, especially if the pronoun is placed as close as possible to its specific antecedent. Sometimes, however, a pronoun is not placed as close as possible to its specific antecedent. Other times, a pronoun lacks a specific antecedent. In both of these cases, the pronoun reference is unclear, resulting into a Pronoun Reference Error. Let’s take a look at these sentences:

-“Pilar told her literary agent that she needed a break.”
  -Whereas the 1st pronoun “her” has a clear and specific antecedent (“Pilar”), the 2nd pronoun “she” does not have a clear and specific antecedent.
  (Who needed a break? Pilar or her literary agent?)

-“As he saw his student sleeping on his desk, the English professor stopped his lecture to tell him that he should pay attention and learn something for a change.”
  -Some of the pronouns in this sentence may seem to have a clear and specific antecedent, but the antecedents for the underlined pronouns (“his” and “he”) are unclear.
  (Whose desk? The student’s desk or the professor’s desk?)
(Who should pay attention? The student or the professor?)

-“He told Professor Nelson that he likes to write with his emotions, not with his mind.”
-Who is he? And who likes to write with his emotions, not with his mind?

-“Antonio and Flavia invited the Gomez family to the party, even though they didn’t like them.”
-Who doesn’t like who?

If you are going to use pronouns in your writing, use them carefully and wisely. Each pronoun must have a specific and clear antecedent. Do not leave your reader confused. Do not make your reader guess who is who and what is what.

There are several ways to solve Pronoun Reference Errors. Let’s take another look at the sample sentences above:

1. “Pilar told her literary agent that she needed a break.”
   a. If it’s Pilar who needs a break and not her literary agent, we can revise this sentence to include a direct quotation from Pilar in order to solve this pronoun reference error.
      i. “Pilar told her literary agent, ‘I need a break.’”
         1. Now we know who needs a break—Pilar, and not her literary agent.

2. “As he saw his student sleeping on his desk, the English professor stopped his lecture to tell him that he should pay attention and learn something for a change.”
   a. If the desk is the student’s and not the professor’s, and if it’s the student who should be paying attention and not the professor, then we can revise the sentence in this way:
      i. “The English professor stopped his lecture to tell his student, who was sleeping on his desk, ‘You should pay attention and learn something for a change.’”
         1. Now we know who should pay attention—the student, and not the professor.
         2. The relative clause “who was sleeping on his desk” refers to “student.” The relative clause begins with the relative pronoun “who,” which has a specific and clear antecedent—“student.” Therefore, the pronoun his refers to the student, and not to the professor.
   a. Remember—relative clauses are modifiers that are placed as close as possible to the word or words they modify. Relative clauses function as adjectives; like adjectives, relative clauses modify nouns or pronouns. The noun closest to the modifier “who was sleeping on his desk” is “student;” therefore, the relative clause
“who was sleeping on his desk” refers to “student.” It makes sense, then, that the pronoun “his” must specifically refer to the antecedent “student.”

3. “He told Professor Nelson that he likes to write with his emotions, not with his mind.”
   a. The 1st pronoun “he” lacks an antecedent, but since pronouns always have a specific reference point, then why not name that specific reference point?
   i. “Xavier told Professor Nelson that he likes to write with his emotions, not with his mind.”
   b. If it’s Xavier who likes to write with his emotions and not with his mind, then why not directly quote Xavier?
   i. “Xavier told Professor Nelson, “I like to write with my emotions, not with my mind.”
   1. Now all the pronoun reference errors in the original sentence have been solved with a few simple revisions.

4. “Antonio and Flavia invited the Gomez family to the party, even though they didn’t like them.”
   a. If it’s Antonio and Flavia who doesn’t like the Gomez family and not vice versa, then why not revise the sentence in this way:
   i. “Antonio and Flavia, who didn’t like the Gomez family, invited them to the party anyway.”
   1. The relative pronoun “who” has a specific and clear antecedent—“Antonio and Flavia.” Now we know who doesn’t like who—Antonio and Flavia do not like the Gomez family.
   2. It’s clear that the pronoun “them” refers to “the Gomez family,” and not “Antonio and Flavia.” Remember that a pronoun must be placed as close as possible to its antecedent. The pronoun “them” is placed close to its antecedent “the Gomez family.”

Remember—each pronoun has a specific reference point. If a pronoun lacks an antecedent (or a specific reference point), then replace that pronoun with the name of its specific reference point. If a pronoun has no clear antecedent, then place that pronoun as close as possible to its antecedent.