Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Error

A pronoun always has a specific reference point, or antecedent. Therefore, it makes sense that the pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number (singular or plural). Let’s take a look at these sentences:

-“Each college has its own standard of academic success.”
  -The pronoun “its” agrees with its antecedent “college” in number because they are both singular.

-“Sadly, most young Americans seem to value entertainment more than education; they would rather watch reality television than learn something useful.”
  -The pronoun “they” agrees with its antecedent “Americans” in number because they are both plural.

-“A student’s success ultimately depends on him or her.”
  -The singular compound pronoun “him or her” agrees with its singular antecedent “student.” Since the antecedent “student” can mean either a male or female student, the more appropriate pronoun would be “him or her,” and not “him” or “her.”

If the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent in number, then the resulting error is a Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Error. Check out these sentences and see if whether or not the pronoun agrees with its antecedent in number.

-“Every student has their own learning speed.”
  -Does the plural possessive pronoun “their” agree with the singular antecedent “student?” (NOTE: Don’t let the adjective “every” fool you. Whether the term “every” means each or all depends on how you use it. In this case, “every” means each, not all.)
  -Since the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent in number, then we should make the appropriate changes: “Every student has his or her own learning speed.”

-“In this shabby hotel, one out of every three rooms has their share of roaches and mice.”
  -Don’t let the prepositional phrases “in this shabby hotel” or “of every three rooms” distract you; the real subject of this sentence is “one,” as in “one out of every three rooms.” In this sentence, the pronoun “their” refers to the subject of the sentence. (What has roaches and mice? One out of every three rooms.) The subject of the sentence is the pronoun’s antecedent. Does the plural pronoun “their” refer to the singular antecedent “one”? Of course not. So make the appropriate changes:

-“In this shabby hotel, one out of every three rooms has its share of roaches and mice.”

-“The professor and writer had their eighth cup of coffee today.”
If the subject in this sentence involves two separate individuals, then wouldn’t it make much more sense to write “the professor and the writer” instead of “the professor and writer?” That’s because compound antecedents like “the professor and the writer” actually refer to two people and are therefore plural in number, while compound antecedents like “The professor and writer” refer to the same person and are therefore singular in number. So the plural possessive pronoun “their” does not agree in number with the singular antecedent “the professor and writer.” As a result, the sentence should be rewritten in this way:
- “The professor and writer had his eighth cup of coffee today.”
Or, if the specific professor and writer is female, then:
- “The professor and writer had her eighth cup of coffee today.”

“The English class took its midterm exam today.”
- Even though the collective noun “class” stands for a single unit of students, each student of the English class took his or her exam individually; the English class did not take the midterm exam as a single unit. The sentence “The English class took its midterm exam today” has the exact same meaning as the sentence “The students of the English class took its midterm exam today.” Does the singular pronoun “it” agree in number with the plural subject “students”? Absolutely not. So make the appropriate changes:
- “The English class took their midterm exam today.”

“The Puerto Rican student club conducted their annual Meringue and Mafongo Fest over the weekend.”
- In this sentence, the collective noun “club” acts as a single unit, so is the plural pronoun “their” appropriate to use here? Let’s revise this sentence so that the pronoun agrees with its antecedent in number:
- “The Puerto Rican student club conducted its annual Meringue and Mafongo Fest over the weekend.”

Remember—if the antecedent is singular, or if the antecedent acts as a singular subject, then the pronoun must be singular. If the antecedent is plural, or if the antecedent acts as a plural subject, then the pronoun must be plural.