Editing 4 You

Who's Who?

Don't confuse your readers with ambiguous antecedents

A Brief Tutorial

The problem with pronouns is that they have to refer to someone or something. If you walked up to a friend in the grocery store and said, "His new car is red," your friend would have absolutely no idea whose car you were talking about.

In the real world, you'd provide some context. Maybe you'd point to the guy at the meat counter while you make your comment. Or maybe you'd say, "I just got off the phone with Jason. His new car is red."

In our writing, it's sometimes easy to short-circuit that context. After all, we know exactly who or what we're talking about. But if we're not careful, we can leave readers scratching their heads.

Check out this tutorial on how things can get muddled and what to do about it.

Happy writing!

A Plethora of Pronouns

Jacqueline looked at Juliet and she thought she could see in her eyes that she disapproved of her plan to get back together with Jeff because of what he'd done to her before. She hesitated to say anything to her friend, though, because she was sure she'd get all defensive on her and claim she really didn't want to understand and didn't care about her happiness.

Can you untangle which she and which her refers to which woman?

It's probably crystal clear in the mind of the writer. But for readers, the only thing they can be sure of is that "he" refers to Jeff.

So how to avoid ambiguity?

Start with the rule

A pronoun	he, his, she, her, hers, it, its
refers to the most recent noun	person, place, thing, proper name
that precedes the pronoun.	

The noun before and nearest to the pronoun is called the antecedent.

Some additional considerations

- The antecedent of a pronoun may – or *may not* – be in the same sentence.
- The antecedent may not even be in the same paragraph as the pronoun.
- In some instances – depending on the intervening text and/or the layout of the text – the antecedent may not even be on the same page as the pronoun.
- The antecedent may occasionally come after the pronoun, such as when an introductory phrase includes a pronoun that refers to the subject of the sentence.

Correct pronoun references are essential to ensure readers aren't confused.

Let's step back to Jacqueline & Juliet

Jacqueline looked at Juliet and she thought she could see in her eyes that she disapproved of her plan to get back together with Jeff because of what he'd done to her before. She hesitated to say anything to her friend, though, because she was sure she'd get all defensive on her and claim she really didn't want to understand and didn't care about her happiness.

According to the rule, every single "she" and "her" that comes after this point refers to Juliet (since there's no other feminine noun between here and the end of the paragraph).

As a practical matter, we can be pretty sure that's not the case. But what did the writer really want us to understand?

Two possibilities

Let's substitute nouns for all the pronouns and see what we come up with

Jacqueline looked at Juliet and Jacqueline thought Jacqueline could see in Juliet's eyes that Juliet disapproved of Jacqueline's plan to get back together with Jeff because of what he'd done to Jacqueline before. Jacqueline hesitated to say anything to Jacqueline's friend, though, because Jacqueline was sure Juliet would get all defensive on Jacqueline and claim Jacqueline really didn't want to understand and didn't care about Juliet's happiness.

Jacqueline looked at Juliet and Jacqueline thought Jacqueline could see in Juliet's eyes that Juliet disapproved of Jacqueline's plan to get back together with Jeff because of what he'd done to Jacqueline before. Juliet hesitated to say anything to Juliet's friend, though, because Juliet was sure Jacqueline would get all defensive on Juliet and claim Juliet really didn't want to understand and didn't care about Jacqueline's happiness.

Either is plausible.

We'll circle back to Jacqueline and Juliet at the end, but let's look at some simpler examples.

Straightforward examples

Bob called Bill to wish him Happy Birthday.

antecedent   pronoun

This one's crystal clear. Bob is wishing Happy B'day to Bill.

"I'm going to ask Jason to the prom," Jennifer told Linda. "Do you think he'll accept?"

pronoun   antecedent

This one's equally clear even though the pronoun is not in the same sentence as its antecedent.

Norris had always been an enigma to Nolan. Nothing he did made any sense.

antecedent   pronoun

It's Norris who is the enigma, so surely it must be Norris who doesn't make any sense. But the antecedent of "he" is "Nolan," so this needs revision.

Still pretty easy

Anne asked Nancy who Dennis was dating. She didn't know but suggested Brittany might.

antecedent   **pronoun**

This one's crystal clear even though the pronoun is not in the same sentence as its antecedent.

"Who's Dennis dating?" Anne asked Nancy.
"I've no idea," she replied, "but Brittany might know. Why don't you ask her?"

pronoun-1
pronoun-2
antecedent-1
antecedent-2

Again, everything is correct and there's no ambiguity.

But what if the dialogue had been written like this?

Chatting with Nancy, Anne asked, "Who's Dennis dating?"
"I've no idea," she replied, "but Brittany might know. Why don't you ask her?"

antecedent-1
pronoun-1

Pronoun-1 has the wrong antecedent because the most recently mentioned noun is "Anne," but it's actually Nancy who replies.
(The relationship between "Brittany" and "her" remains correct.)

Stepping it up a notch

Garrett and Bill hadn't spoken since the big ruckus over the three-pointer in the pickup basketball game. So when the invitation to the birthday party arrived, he chucked it in the wastebasket.

antecedent   pronoun

This one's somewhat ambiguous. As written, Bill received the invitation and threw it away. Could be right. But the first sentence begins with "Garrett," potentially signaling that he's the focus of this bit of narrative. Hmmmm. Precisely what did the author intend?
(This also illustrates how lots of text between pronoun and antecedent might make it easier to miss a potential problem.)

So how could we eliminate the ambiguity?

Bill hadn't spoken to Garrett since the big ruckus over the three-pointer in the pickup basketball game. So when the invitation to the birthday party arrived, he chucked it in the wastebasket.	**Better because the antecedent and pronoun are in the right relationship. But it leaves the reader wondering, "Whose party?"**
Garrett and Bill hadn't spoken since the big ruckus over the three-pointer in the pickup basketball game. So when the invitation to Bill's birthday party arrived, Garrett chucked it in the wastebasket.	**Crystal clear because it explicitly states whose party and who did the chucking.**
Garrett and Bill hadn't spoken since the big ruckus over the three-pointer in the pickup basketball game. So when Garrett got Bill's birthday party invitation, he chucked it in the wastebasket.	**Equally clear. In this case "Bill's" is an adjective modifying "invitation" – not a noun – so the antecedent of "he" is "Garrett."**

Can you think of other solutions?

A bit more complex

Rosa unlocked the door. "Go find your father and tell him we're back," she told her daughter as she pushed it open and helped her up the steps.

So what's right and what's ambiguous with this one?
(It's a bit too complicated to draw.)

Right	Ambiguous
"him" refers back to "father"	The second "she" refers to "daughter"
"it" refers back to "door" (Did that one surprise you?)	The second "her" refers to "daughter"
The first "she" and the first "her" refer back to Rosa	But the second "her" is correct, I can hear you saying ☺ And that's kind of right.
	The ambiguity arises from the fact that the second "she" is really intended to reference Rosa, who would be helping her daughter up the steps. So the "shes" and "hers" get mixed up.

So how could we eliminate the ambiguity?

Rosa unlocked the door and pushed it open. "Go find your father and tell him we're back," she told her daughter and helped the little girl up the steps.

Very simple fix. All "she" and "her" now refer to Rosa. Everything's crystal clear.

Unlocking the door and pushing it open, Rosa helped her daughter up the steps and told her, "Go find your father and tell him we're back."

Equally clear. The first "her" refers to Rosa and the second one to "daughter."

Can you think of other solutions?

Are there ever any exceptions?

Naturally!

When a reasonable person couldn't possibly misunderstand your intent, it's permissible to relax your application of the rule a bit.

The tricky bit is recognizing what's in your head that a reader might not have access to. The magic you weave as a writer is to transform the vision in your head to the page that will be read such that readers can't misconstrue your intent.

An example where a bit of relaxation might be acceptable

Mark paused in the middle of compiling his list of friends and acquaintances. He and Josh did practically everything together. Did that make them best buds? He though it might.

There's no doubt that these are Mark's musings. So even though the immediate antecedent of the final "he" is Josh, any reasonable reader will understand that it's Mark doing the thinking.

So how do I find antecedent problems?
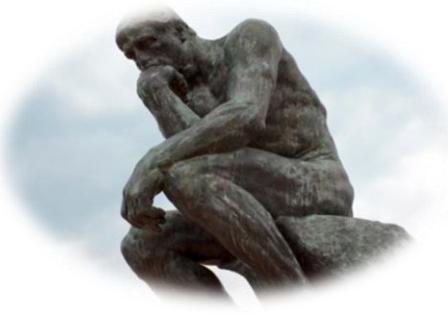
As with so many things in grammar, it helps to think like a literalist.

- Put what you know about the scene out of your mind. Read it as if you were seeing the words for the first time. Could it be ambiguous?

- When you write or read a pronoun, scan backward until you find a noun. Is it the one you meant?

- Try replacing the pronouns with the most recent noun in your text. For he or she, look backward to the last mention of a man or woman or the last reference to a man or woman by name. Plug that in place of the pronoun. Is it right?

- Does this section of your text seem to have a whole lot of pronouns? The risk of a mismatch might be higher. Check them all out to be sure.

- Is the flow awkward? Might readers have to backtrack to figure out who or what you're talking about? This might indicate an antecedent problem – but it might also just indicate that the sentence (or paragraph) would benefit from restructuring.

Circling back to Jacqueline & Juliet

Jacqueline looked at Juliet and she thought she could see in her eyes that she disapproved of her plan to get back together with Jeff because of what he'd done to her before. She hesitated to say anything to her friend, though, because she was sure she'd get all defensive on her and claim she really didn't want to understand and didn't care about her happiness.

This is a contrived example, of course. But a writer in a hurry on a first draft might occasionally pen some convoluted prose. So how can we fix it? Here's one possibility.

When she mentioned the plan to get back together with Jeff, Jacqueline saw the disapproval in Juliet's eyes. Juliet said nothing, knowing her friend would only become defensive and claim Juliet either didn't understand or didn't care about her friend's happiness.

Perhaps even better to switch from "tell" to "show"

"Jeff and I are getting back together," Jacqueline announced. "So tell me what you think."

There was disapproval in Juliet's eyes, but she hesitated, unsure if she wanted to hear her friend's barrage of defensiveness. "Don't you remember what he did the last time?" she finally asked.

"Come on, Juliet, don't you understand that's all in the past? Or do you just not care if I'm happy?"

Can you think of other solutions?