Pronouns are words that refer to "something else" – usually a noun – earlier in the sentence or in a previous sentence.

Jill watched **her** *favorite movie.*

In this example, "her" refers to Jill.

Pat walked **his** *dog.*

In this example, "his" refers to Pat.

The doctors found *their* *stethoscopes.*

In this example, "their" is referring to the doctors.

All is well when pronouns are used correctly; readers can then understand the intended meaning immediately. But, all too often, pronouns are used sloppily, and readers are uncertain what the pronoun is referring to. Here are some examples:

PRONOUN REFERENCE ERROR: **Academic writing can be intimidating, especially when they only get negative feedback.**

Who are "they"? The "they" pronoun is not referring to anything else. But, since the sentence is about academic writing, we can assume that "they" must be students.

CORRECTED: **Academic writing can be intimidating, especially when students only get negative feedback.**

PRONOUN REFERENCE ERROR: **The book was well-written, and he did a good job of reinforcing the love theme.**

Who is "he"? The writer probably means "the author" and should have written the sentence that way.

CORRECTED: **The book was well-written, and the author did a good job of reinforcing the love theme.**

CORRECTED: **The book was well-written and contained a strong theme of love.**

PRONOUN REFERENCE ERROR: **I like to use the computer for spell check and grammar check, but I don't always use it.**

Is "it" the computer? Spell check? Grammar check? Depending upon the answer to that question, any of the following versions could be correct:

CORRECTED: **I like to use the computer's spell check and grammar check, but I don't always use it.**

CORRECTED: **I like to use the computer for spell check and grammar check, but I don't always use them.**

CORRECTED: **I like to use the computer for spell check and grammar check, but I don't always use spell check.**

CORRECTED: **I like to use the computer for spell check and grammar check, but I don't always use grammar check.**