Writing Tip: December 11, 2001

Singular Indefinite Pronouns: Part I

What is wrong in each of the following sentences?

1. Everyone came to our office party and brought their favorite dessert.

2. Each employee has to sign their annual evaluation and return it by December 31.

3. Someone forgot to lock the front door last night when they left the building.

4. Anyone who has worked for the company for at least six months is eligible for retirement benefits, but they have to complete the appropriate forms.

All of these sentences incorrectly use a plural personal pronoun (namely, "they" and "their") to refer to a singular antecedent.

The antecedents ("everyone," "each," "someone," and "anyone") are indefinite pronouns, so called because they do not refer to a specific person, place, or thing. All of these indefinite pronouns are singular. Not only must we use a singular verb with them, but we must also refer to them with singular personal pronouns. Thus, one way to correct the sentences above is to replace the plural personal pronouns with their singular counterparts:

1. EVERYONE came to our office party and brought HIS OR HER favorite dessert.
2. EACH employee has to sign HIS OR HER annual evaluation and return it by December 31.

3. SOMEONE forgot to lock the front door last night when HE OR SHE left the building.

4. ANYONE who has worked for the company for at least six months is eligible for retirement benefits, but HE OR SHE HAS to complete the appropriate forms.

But since the frequent use of the nonexist phrase "he or she" is awkward and wordy, we can write a better sentence by avoiding the singular antecedent if possible or by avoiding the use of a pronoun later in the sentence. Here are some examples:

-- Everyone came to our office party and brought a favorite dessert.

-- Someone forgot to lock the front door last night when leaving the building.

-- Anyone who has worked for the company for at least six months is eligible for retirement benefits but must first complete the appropriate forms.

Notice that sentence 2 must stick with the "his or her" construction in order to be completely clear. It would not make sense, for example, to say, "EACH employee has to sign AN annual evaluation and return it by December 31" because we then suggest that the employees do not have to sign their own evaluations.

One option is to change the singular pronoun "each" to the plural "all":

ALL employees have to sign THEIR annual evaluations and return them by December 31.

But the image conveyed to the reader is not quite as precise as when we use the singular pronouns. The fact is that each individual employee must sign his or her own evaluation; the activity cannot logically be performed by the group acting together.

Here is a list of third-person, singular indefinite pronouns:

anyone
anybody
anything
Certain indefinite pronouns, namely "any," "all," "some," "none," "more," and "most," can be singular or plural, depending upon their antecedents, but we will save that discussion for another tip.

TEST YOURSELF:

How might each of these incorrect sentences be corrected to avoid a pronoun error?

1. Everybody is leaving work early to be home with their families for a long weekend.

2. Neither of the books has writing in their margins.

3. Each of the players on the softball team has to wash their uniform between games.

POSSIBLE ANSWERS (answers may vary):

1. ALL EMPLOYEES are leaving work early to be home with their families for a long weekend. [changed the singular "everybody" to the plural "all employees" and kept the plural "their"]

2. Neither of the books has writing in ITS margins. [OR. . . in THE margins.]

3. If we know the players are all female, we could write "Each of the players on the softball team has to wash HER uniform between games." But if we
are uncertain about the gender of the players, or if the team is coed, we might write "EACH of the players on the softball team has to wash HIS OR HER uniform between games" or "ALL of the players on the softball team have to wash THEIR uniforms between games." The latter choice, however, is not as precise as the former because it fails to present the picture of each player washing his or her individual uniform.

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