

Vague Pronouns



Each of these sentences has the same problem:

- * Harry was always late for class, and it drove his teacher crazy.
- * Harry was always late for class, and this drove his teacher crazy.
- * Harry was always late for class, which drove his teacher crazy.

That problem is vague pronoun reference. **It**, **this**, and **which** are pronouns, and they need to refer back to a specific noun, not to the whole idea of a previous statement. In these three sentences, the pronouns refer to the idea that Harry was always late, but they can't logically refer back to either of the two nouns, *Harry* or *class*.

Ways to Correct Vague Pronouns

1. You could combine the two parts into a single statement:

The fact that Harry was always late drove his teacher crazy.

Harry's habitual lateness drove his teacher crazy.

2. You could replace **it** with a noun:

Harry was always late for class, and **his habitual lateness** drove his teacher crazy.

Harry's habitual lateness drove his teacher crazy.

3. You could add a noun to **this**:

Harry was always late for class, and **this habit of his** drove his teacher crazy.

4. You could add a noun before **which**:

Harry was always late for class, **a habit which** drove his teacher crazy.

Practice

Here are some sentences for you to correct. Try to correct each one in more than one way.

1. Harry promised to stop smoking, which I didn't believe for a minute.
2. Prof. Jones doesn't seem to care if students cheat, and this really bothers me.
3. My roommate decided to major in Physics, and it came as a big surprise to all her friends.
4. Many people go to the gym; they find that this gives them more energy.
5. When the senators realized the bill would be defected, they tried to postpone the vote but failed. It was a disaster.
6. Harry has two heads, and it upsets me sometimes.

Answers

When you finish this worksheet, you can make an appointment to come back and meet with a writing assistant to review it. You can also come in to work with a writing assistant on any papers you are writing.

In the meantime, you can check your answers against these possibilities here:

1. Harry promised to stop smoking, but I didn't believe him for a minute.
2. Prof. Jones doesn't seem to care if students cheat, and this indifference really bothers me.
3. My roommate decided to major in Physics, and her decision came as a big surprise to all her friends.
4. Many people go to the gym at least three times a week; they find that frequent exercise gives them more energy.
5. When the senators realized the bill would be defected, they tried to postpone the vote but failed. The entire effort was a disaster.
6. Harry has two heads, a physical trait which sometimes upsets me.

Resources

For more information on the vague *which*, *it*, and *this* and other grammar issues, consult the following resources:

- *The Bedford St. Martin's Handbook*
- The Online Writing Lab at Purdue, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>