

ARTICLE ON PRONOUNS

An *ambiguous reference* occurs when there are two or more possible antecedents for a pronoun:

UNCLEAR:

Mandela met de Klerk for the first time in 1990 at the presidential residence in Cape Town. After the meeting, *he* said that *he* was clearly interested in moving the country toward democracy. [The antecedent for the pronoun *he* is ambiguous. The pronouns could refer to either de Klerk or Mandela or both.]

CLEAR:

Mandela met de Klerk for the first time in 1990 at the presidential residence in Cape Town. After the meeting, *Mandela* said that *de Klerk* was clearly interested in moving the country toward democracy.

A *broad reference* occurs when a pronoun refers to an entire statement rather than to a specific noun or nouns:

UNCLEAR:

Both Mandela and de Klerk made critical concessions during the negotiation process. *This* paved the way toward the eventual agreement that led to a majority-rule democracy for South Africa. [The pronoun *this* is intended to substitute for the entire sentence preceding it. As a result, its antecedent is unclear.]

CLEAR:

Both Mandela and de Klerk made critical concessions during the negotiation process. *Their concessions* paved the way toward the eventual agreement that led to majority-rule democracy for South Africa.

A *weak reference* occurs when the antecedent is a noun that cannot *logically* be replaced by the pronoun.

UNCLEAR:

Mandela was at one time a lawyer. *This*, of course, was not a job that was totally suited to his ambitions. [The pronoun *this* is intended to substitute for the word *lawyer*. However, the reference is unclear because a “lawyer” does not substitute regularly for “job” since one has to account for the activity carried out by the lawyer.]

CLEAR:

Mandela was at one time a lawyer. *Practicing law*, of course, was not a job that was suited to his ambitions.

Or

Mandela was at one time a lawyer. *Being a lawyer*, of course, was not a job that was suited to his ambitions.

Finally, be sure when you use a pronoun that it agrees, or corresponds in form, with its antecedent in *person* (first, second, third), *number* (singular, plural), and if possible, *gender* (masculine, feminine, neuter).

(Adapted from the book, *Structuring Paragraphs*)