

Stalking the Wild Pronoun*: A Brief Guide to Grammatically and Politically Correct usage

Nellie Kremenak, PhD

doi: 10.1111/j.1532-849X.2010.00608.x

Pronouns are the parts of speech in the English language that can be substituted for nouns. They can be singular or plural (e.g., *he* or *they*), they may denote gender (*he* or *she*) or they may not (*we*, *they*). Using pronouns allows the writer to avoid boring and awkward or confusing reiterations of a particular noun.

For example:

*Dr. John Smith plans to hire new staff when **he** opens **his** new office in the suburbs.*

is much smoother than:

Dr. John Smith plans to hire new staff when Dr. Smith opens Dr. Smith's new office . . .

It is important to use pronouns correctly if the writer wishes to avoid appearing badly educated or worse. One way in which problems or missteps in the use of pronouns frequently arise occurs when the writer fails to denote gender correctly (thus falling into the "or worse" category). By correctly, I mean both grammatically correct and politically correct.

This boils down to the following rule of pronoun etiquette:

When speaking or writing in general terms, for example in reference to a generic patient, it is **not** acceptable to use only masculine pronouns, as in: "Remind the patient to clean his teeth at least twice daily."

Does this dentist have only male patients, one may ask? Probably not. Presumably, the individual who composed this sentence was trying to avoid the somewhat awkward—though grammatically correct—*Remind the patient that it is important to clean **his or her** teeth daily*—or the even more awkward solution involving the slash, as in ***his/her** teeth*. Or the quite alarming—*s/he*. Using only the feminine pronoun in this situa-

tion would be even worse, condescending if the author is male or unpleasantly assertive if the author is a woman.

On the other hand, it is *definitely* not acceptable, either politically or grammatically, to substitute the pronouns *they* or *their* when the writer is actually referring to a single individual. This particularly awkward device is used by some writers to avoid seeming to conform to anti-sexist standards without actually doing so. *Remind the patient to brush **their** teeth daily*. This is both politically and grammatically terrible.

And, let me be clear, by politically correct, I mean recognizing that women have and deserve to have equal recognition in the scheme of things, whether we are talking about patients or dentists or any other category that actually includes humans of both sexes.

Remember also that, in many instances, both grammatical and political problems can be avoided by simply restructuring the sentence. For example:

Remind the patient of the importance of daily oral hygiene.
or

Remind the patient of the importance of cleaning the teeth after every meal.

Finally, we can be reminded that, though a bit awkward, "his or her" is actually not unacceptable and is sometimes unavoidable.

*With apologies to Euell Gibbons, whose *Stalking the wild asparagus* (New York: D. McCay Co., 1962) was beloved by counter-culture folks in the 1960s. The Library of Congress catalog lists six other books whose titles begin "Stalking the wild . . ."

Copyright of Journal of Prosthodontics is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.