

Vague Pronouns Confuse Your Reader

by Brian Smith

One of the worst things you can do as a writer is confuse your reader. Having to read a sentence multiple times to get your meaning will not only annoy him/her but will perhaps cost you a few points if you're being graded.

One culprit of this problem is **incorrect pronoun references**. Simply put, the writer refers to plural nouns (people, places, things) with singular pronouns (he, she, it, etc.). This issue is dealt with in "Pronoun Agreement" by Chris Folts.

Another issue is **vague pronoun references**. For example, writers often use "it," "this," "that" or other pronouns to refer to a prior idea, but the reference is unclear. Similarly, terms like "aspect" and "factor" can be vague if they are not defined or identified clearly.

Here are two examples of vague references:

- 1) In addition, the Egyptians have a tradition of reminding people of their mortality after they eat: "The man shows the corpse to all the guests, one by one, while saying: 'Look on this while you drink for this will be your lot when you are dead.'" (Herodotus, 2.78) [This](#) illustrates a vast difference in mind-set between the Egyptians and other cultures of the time.

What is the "this" referencing? The reader might assume that the writer refers to the traditional saying or to the dining custom or to awareness of mortality mentioned in the first sentence. To clarify, name the "this."

In addition, the Egyptians have a tradition of reminding people of their mortality after they eat: "The man shows the corpse to all the guests, one by one, while saying: 'Look on this while you drink for this will be your lot when you are dead.'" (Herodotus, 2.78) [This constant awareness of death](#) illustrates a vast difference in mind-set between the Egyptians and other cultures of the time.

Simply adding "constant awareness of death" clarifies 'this' and makes the "mindset" clearer.

- 2) The members of these religions were extremely devoted to their way of life; however, when faced with a different religion's customs, they usually viewed these variations as ridiculous. Never is [this](#) more obvious than when Cambyses mocks the Egyptian religious customs.

*Again, 'this' is vague.
Ask yourself, "This what?" You can communicate more when you Identify "this."*

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As you can see, vague pronouns are not a hard issue to address. Be alert and replace vague terms like "this," "it," "that," "what."

Though the vague references do not seem like a big deal, they are. Avoiding vague references will improve your ability to communicate your ideas to your reader.