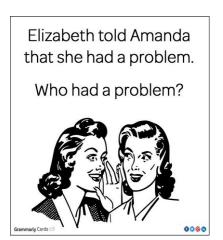# Avoid Vague Pronoun References

How might you address the pronoun reference problems that occur throughout your essay?

> Thomas was always unprepared for class. It made his teacher increasingly mad.

> Thomas was always unprepared for class. This made his teacher increasingly mad.

The highlighted words represent **vague pronouns** because a reader cannot tell which noun the pronoun is referring to in each example. By definition, pronouns, which take the place of a noun, cannot refer to an idea expressed in an entire sentence or statement; instead, a pronoun must refer back to a specific noun.

Writers use pronouns to avoid redundancy. The word to which the pronoun refers is generally called the "antecedent." Pronouns need to agree in number, agree in person, and refer clearly to a specific noun. An extremely common mistake made by college writers is using pronouns—particularly the pronouns *it*, *which*, *that*, and *this*—without a clear antecedent.

Possible Ways to Fix Vague Pronouns

- **Replace *it* with a noun:**
  Thomas was always unprepared for class, and ***his constant unpreparedness*** drove his teacher crazy.

- **Add a noun to *this*:**
  Thomas was always unprepared for class, and ***this habit of his*** drove his teacher crazy.

- **Combine the two parts into a single statement:**
  Thomas's constant unpreparedness made his teacher increasingly mad.

- **Add a noun before *which*:**
  Thomas was always unprepared for class, ***a habit which*** drove his teacher crazy.

Remember, just because you (the writer) know what noun your pronoun is referring to doesn't mean that it is clear to the reader. One major goal of mature writers is cultivating a writing style that privileges clarity. Vague pronoun usage detracts from the momentum of your paper and, at the same time, causes confusion for your reader.