Rule 1: Know the *general* rule governing pronoun agreement.

A pronoun must agree with its *antecedent*.

The *antecedent* is usually a *noun* that the pronoun *replaces*. For example, you can replace *Mrs. Hill* with *she* or *her*, the *students* with *they* or *them*. 

Here are two examples:

The *lizard* licked *its* eyeball.

*Lizard* = singular antecedent  
*its* = singular pronoun

The *lizards* licked *their* eyeballs.

*Lizards* = plural antecedent  
*their* = plural pronoun
Know the difference between these *singular* and *plural* personal pronouns.

**Singular**
- He, she, it
- Him, her, it
- His, hers, its
- Himself, herself, itself

**Plural**
- They
- Them
- Their, theirs
- Themselves
Do not confuse *it’s* with *its*.

- *It’s* [with an apostrophe] means *it is* or *it has*.
- *Its* [without an apostrophe] means *belonging to it*—for example, *its* bowl, *its* sharp teeth, *its* long claws, etc.
- Possessive pronouns—*unlike* possessive nouns—do *not* need an apostrophe with the final *s*. 
Rule 2, Part 1: The conjunction *and* can cause problems with pronoun agreement.

Two [or more] singular things joined by *and* become a *plural* antecedent.

The new puppy *and* kitten have destroyed *their* owner’s sofa.
Rule 2, Part 2: When *each* or *every* precedes two [or more] singular things joined by *and*, a *singular* antecedent is formed.

*Each* new puppy *and* kitten destroys *its* owner’s sofa.
In this situation, no matter how many singular nouns you join with and, the antecedent is still singular.

Each new puppy, kitten, rabbit, tarantula, python, parrot, iguana, and ferret destroys its owner’s sofa.
Rule 3: Use caution with these three correlative conjunctions: *either ... or*, *neither ... nor*, and *not only ... but also*.

Of the two antecedents in the sentence, the pronoun must agree with the *closer* one.
Here are two examples:

Not only Louise but also the **Smiths** fixed **their** famous squid eyeball stew for the picnic.

Not only the Smiths but also **Louise** fixed **her** famous squid eyeball stew for the picnic.
Indefinite pronouns cause the biggest headaches for pronoun agreement.
Rule 4, Part 1: These *indefinite pronouns* are always *singular* [even when they *seem* plural].

- Each, either, neither
- Anyone, anybody, anything
- Everyone, everybody, everything
- No one, nobody, nothing
- Someone, somebody, something
Everyone on Earth = more than one person—billions of people, in fact.
The word everyone, however, is still singular and requires a singular pronoun for agreement.
Neither of my two brothers show much sense when they date women.

This sentence might sound right, but it is completely wrong!

*Neither* of my two brothers *shows* much sense when *he* dates women.  
[Neither = singular.]
Wow, what a **babe**!

Wow, what a **fat wallet**!
Now imagine a parked car like this one:
Rule 4, Part 2: When fixing an agreement error, try to avoid sexist language that might offend your readers.

The sentence below sounds natural but has an error.

Someone left their lights on.
In the 1950s, rule books would have recommended using the *masculine* pronoun exclusively.

Oh, my!
Someone left *his* lights on.
In the 1970s, after criticism from feminists and civil rights activists, rule books next suggested using both genders so that males and females had equal representation in the language.

Someone left his or her lights on.

I can see them along the watch tower...
A writer who begins with *he or she* or *him or her* will need to be consistent. But look what happens …
May 17, 2011

Student Success

If a student wants to improve his or her grades, he or she should walk himself or herself over to the tutoring center. There, he or she can request a tutor to help him or her with his or her homework. This preparation for his or her class will ensure that he or she is ready when taking his or her quizzes and exams. In addition, the tutor might have old work to share. This way, the student can find out himself/herself what to expect on the assignments for a specific instructor that might change his/her assignments rarely. Thus, the one thing that will insure the success of a student is that he or she gets a tutor to help him or her.
In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, fix the error \textit{without} the annoying repetition.

There’s a car with \textit{its} lights on.

Thankfully, \textit{my} wheels don’t have \textit{that} problem.
Rule 4, Part 3: Some indefinite pronouns are *singular or plural*, depending on *context*.

- All
- Any
- None*
- More
- Most
- Some

**All** of Beverly’s hair gets *its* color from a bottle.

**All** of Beverly’s fingernails get *their* color from a bottle.
Some *groups* of people, like a *jury*, also cause pronoun agreement *problems*.
Rule 5: Collective nouns are singular or plural, depending on context.

- Collective nouns are groups of people: team, jury, class, committee, army, family, etc.

- If all members are acting in unison, treat the collective noun as singular and use a singular pronoun.

- If, however, all members are acting individually, treat the noun as plural and use a plural pronoun.
Read these examples:

The **team** celebrated **its** victory.

The **team** changed into **their** street clothes and went home happy.
When you cannot *decide* if the collective noun is singular or plural, insert a *plural noun* after the collective noun, like this:

The *team members* ran out onto the field to meet *their* opponent.
Rule 6: Companies, organizations, and schools are singular and thus require singular pronouns.

One urban legend is that Tito’s Taco Palace makes its burritos with kangaroo meat.

The Pencil Enthusiast Society uses the donations it receives to insure all writing instruments have sharp points.

Next year, Weaver College will try to solve its parking woes by requiring students to buy a $75 parking decal.