



PRONOUN USAGE – MYTHS & FACTS

Before delving into the article, let us look at some sentences and test our knowledge of pronoun usage.

- a. The UV radiation emitted by the Sun is carcinogenic and hazardous in ozone-free areas.
- b. The UV radiation emitted by the Sun is highly dangerous because it has a very low wavelength.
- c. A solar flare emitted by the Sun can destroy a communication satellite because scientists estimated that its temperature is high enough to accelerate further damage.

In terms of pronoun usage, which of the above sentence(s) do you think is/are incorrect?
Read on for the answers. ☺

COMMON CONFUSION

Students usually falter with the usage of pronouns because of some existing myths regarding pronouns. Through the next four articles in this series, we will present four such myths and break them down once and for all. After reading these articles, you'll have a much better understanding of correct pronoun usage and be able to identify pronoun errors.

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE

Before we go on to talk about myths, let me reinforce the underlying principle behind pronoun usage.

"A pronoun should have only one Logical Antecedent".

This is the only principle behind pronoun usage. For instance, there can be multiple nouns in a sentence. But if the pronoun in the sentence logically refers to only one noun, that is, if only one noun makes sense when the pronoun is replaced by it, in that case we have only one logical antecedent for the pronoun. Such a sentence remains logically sound because despite the presence of multiple nouns, the logical meaning is conveyed by replacing the pronoun with only one particular noun. If in a sentence that has multiple nouns a pronoun can be replaced by more than one noun and the sentence gives logical meaning by all such replacements, then we certainly have pronoun ambiguity. In such a case the pronoun seems to have more than one logical antecedent.

PROBLEM SOLVING

With this point in mind, let us now revisit the sentences in the above exercise.

a. The UV radiation emitted by the Sun is carcinogenic and hazardous in ozone-free areas. There isn't any pronoun used in this sentence and the sentence is correct.

b. The UV radiation emitted by the Sun is highly dangerous because it has a very low wavelength.

There are three nouns in this sentence. "UV radiation", "Sun" and "wavelength".

Now keeping our above mentioned principle in mind, let us see which one among these three can be a logical antecedent.

i. Is "UV radiation" a logical antecedent of the pronoun "it" in this sentence?

In other words, does the statement "UV radiation has a very low wavelength" make sense in this context?

Yes. It does. It is perfectly logical to talk about the wavelength of radiation. The sentence “UV radiation has a very low wavelength and so the UV emitted by the Sun is highly dangerous” makes sense in this context. So “UV radiation” is a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.

ii. Is “Sun” a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it” in this sentence?

Again, ask yourself the following.

Does the statement “Sun has a very low wavelength” make sense in this context?

No. The statement isn’t logical. The sentence “Sun has a very low wavelength” doesn’t make sense at all. So “Sun” isn’t a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.

iii. Is “wavelength” a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it” in this sentence? To answer this question, ask yourself the following.

Does the statement “wavelength has a very low wavelength” make sense in this context?

No. It doesn’t. It isn’t logical at all. So “wavelength” isn’t a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.



*The **UV radiation** emitted by the Sun is highly dangerous because **it** has a very low wavelength.*

So we have only one logical antecedent of the pronoun “it” in this sentence. So this sentence is correct.

c. A solar flare emitted by the Sun can destroy a communication satellite because scientists estimated that its temperature is high enough to accelerate further damage.

There are four possible antecedents in this sentence. They are “solar flare”, “Sun”, “communication satellite” and “temperature”.

Now following a similar approach as in the previous example

i. Does the statement “Solar flare’s temperature is high enough to accelerate further damage to a communication satellite” make sense in this context?

Yes. It is perfectly logical. So “Solar flare” is a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.

ii. Does the statement “Sun’s temperature is high enough to accelerate further damage to a communication satellite” make sense in this context?

Yes! Therefore “Sun” is a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.

iii. Does the statement “Communication Satellite’s temperature is high enough to accelerate further damage to a communication satellite” make sense in this context?

Yes. A satellite might have high temperature. It does make sense. So “Communication satellite” is a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.

iv. Does the statement “Temperature’s temperature is high enough to accelerate further damage to a communication satellite” make sense in this context?

NO! It is not at all logical to say so. Therefore “temperature” is not a logical antecedent of the pronoun “it”.



The pronoun “it” in this sentence has more than one logical antecedent. So there is pronoun ambiguity in this sentence.

In the above examples, wherever a pronoun is used, we replaced the pronoun with the possible antecedents and checked if the sentences made sense.

If no antecedents make sense, we say there is no logical antecedent to the pronoun.

If more than one antecedent makes sense, we say that there is pronoun ambiguity in the sentence.

IN THE CONTEXT OF GMAT

Pronoun errors are quite often tested on GMAT and GMAT continues to confuse students with these errors. Furthermore pronoun errors are not as deterministic as SV errors or Modifier errors are. Therefore, pronoun error should be used as a last reason to reject an option choice, only after all other deterministic errors have been used in the process of elimination. Such scenarios arise in quite a few difficult questions on the GMAT.

DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT PRONOUNS

So now we will look at some of the myths students have regarding the usage of pronouns and will debunk them. Given below in the table are some of the most common myths surrounding pronoun usage and the actual facts associated with them.

MYTH	FACT	Tentative Date of Publishing
<i>A pronoun can refer only to the nearest noun</i>	<i>Long Distance Relationships <u>can</u> work! (Between antecedents and pronouns ☺)</i>	2 nd Oct
<i>A pronoun in a clause cannot refer to a noun in another clause</i>	<i>Love (between antecedent and pronoun) knows no boundaries!</i>	4 th Oct
<i>Antecedent of a pronoun cannot lie in a prepositional phrase</i>	<i>Prepositional Phrases are not black holes! Antecedents <u>can</u> come out of them!!</i>	7 th Oct
<i>Antecedent should always appear before the respective pronoun.</i>	<i>At times the best need not appear first!</i>	9 th Oct

Keep an eye on this thread to read in detail about these myths and the facts associated with them.

Thanks. 😊
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