

Campus Academic Resource Program

Reflexive Pronouns

This handout will:

- Define pronouns
- Explain reflexive pronouns
- Demonstrate when to use a reflexive pronoun
- Give examples of reflexive pronoun use
- Provide exercises to test knowledge of reflexive pronouns

Pronouns

Before we explain reflexive pronouns, we will define pronouns so as to more easily see the correlation between the two. Pronouns substitute nouns and proper nouns to condense sentences.

- A noun is a person, place, or thing.
 - Person: Student
 - Pronoun: she or he
 - Place: School
 - Pronoun: it
 - Thing: Book or Books
 - Pronoun: it or them
- A proper noun is someone's name or the name of a specific place.
 - Someone's name: Stacey
 - Pronoun: she or her
 - Specific place: China
 - Pronoun: it

We use pronouns to condense sentences so that the sentence does not use nouns and proper nouns repeatedly. For example:

- *Charles* always walks to school because *Charles* does not believe in spending money on public transportation.
 - This sentence uses the proper noun, "*Charles*", but lacks pronouns. Replacing some of the proper nouns with pronouns aids the reading of the sentence.
- Charles always walks to school because *he* does not believe in spending money on public transportation.
 - Since we use "Charles" at the beginning of these sentences, the reader knows that "Charles" is the subject (also defined as the "antecedent" of the pronoun). Therefore, when we substituted the other instance of "Charles" with "he", the reader knows the pronoun refers to this antecedent.

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As a subset of pronouns, reflexive pronouns also substitute nouns and proper nouns. They are used as objects and subjective complements of the sentence. Or, the subject and object of the sentence are the same noun (*The Transitive Vampire*). More specifically, we use reflexive pronouns "as a direct

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object when the object is the same as the subject of the verb” (BritishCouncil.org). It is beneficial to use reflexive pronouns because they make sentences more concise.

- Reflexive pronouns are:
 - Singular: myself, yourself, herself, itself, and himself
 - Plural: ourselves, yourselves, and themselves
- For example:
 - *She* called *herself* to find her phone.
 - Direct object: herself
 - Object: she
 - Subject: she
 - Verb: to call
- However, we have to be careful when we use pronouns too often because they can confuse the reader. An “ambiguous pronoun” is when the reflexive pronoun (or any pronoun) could possibly refer to any number of subjects. It is called an “ambiguous pronoun” because your reader is unsure to whom the reflexive pronoun is referring.
 - For example:
 - *Sharon and Stacey* worked quite diligently in the class; *she* could have written the anthology *herself*.
 - This sentence has plural subjects (Sharon and Stacey). However, since the pronoun and reflexive pronoun are singular, we are unsure who the pronoun and reflexive pronoun refer to.
 - There are two ways to fix the example sentence.
 - 1. Change the pronoun and reflexive pronoun to their plural forms to match the plural subjects.
 - *Sharon and Stacey* worked quite diligently in the class; *they* could have written the anthology *themselves*.
 - 2. Replace the pronoun (she) with a name so the reader knows who the reflexive pronoun is referring to.
 - *Sharon and Stacey* worked quite diligently in the class; *Stacey* could have written the anthology *herself*.

Examples of Reflexive Pronoun Use

Now that we have familiarized ourselves with how to use reflexive pronouns, we can review examples of how to use reflexive pronouns in both singular and plural forms.

- Singular
 - *I* trained for the marathon by *myself*.
 - This example uses “by”, a preposition, to emphasize that the subject, “I”, accomplished something alone.
 - Did *you* hurt *yourself* during the hike?

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- Since *Natasha* had such a busy schedule, she could not wait to have some time to *herself*.
- By *itself*, the *lecture* was boring.
- *Damian* accidentally tripped *himself* while not paying attention to the trail.
- Plural
 - Since *we* had not received help in the past, we planned on doing the fundraiser by *ourselves*.
 - Help *yourselves* to the refreshments and snacks.
 - *Joe and Lisa* have plenty of experience; they can manage the project *themselves*.

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Exercise 1

Fill in the following blanks with the appropriate reflexive pronoun and circle whether the subject is singular or plural. Then, use the space below each exercise to explain your choices.

1. I can do the homework by _____.
- a. Singular
 - b. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? _____

Why did you choose "Singular" or "Plural"? _____

2. They found _____ in quite a predicament.
- a. Singular
 - b. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? _____

Why did you choose "Singular" or "Plural"? _____

3. If you want to be genuine toward others, you should always be _____.
- a. Singular
 - b. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? _____

Why did you choose "Singular" or "Plural"? _____

4. I don't feel like going to the party. Can we just hang out by _____?
- a. Singular
 - b. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? _____

Why did you choose "Singular" or "Plural"? _____

5. The dog keeps biting _____ because of the fleas.
- a. Singular
 - b. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? _____

Why did you choose "Singular" or "Plural"? _____

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Answer Key

1. I can do the homework by myself.
 - a. Singular

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? We use the reflexive pronoun “**myself**” to refer to the subject “**I**.”

Why did you choose “Singular” or “Plural”? The pronoun is **singular** because it refers to one person, “**I**.”

2. They found themselves in quite a predicament.
 - a. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? We use the reflexive pronoun “**themselves**” to refer to the subject “**they**.”

Why did you choose “Singular” or “Plural”? The pronoun is **plural** because it refers to multiple people in a group, “**they**.”

3. If you want to be genuine toward others, you should always be yourself.
 - a. Singular

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? We use the reflexive pronoun “**yourself**” to refer to the subject “**you**.”

Why did you choose “Singular” or “Plural”? The pronoun is **singular** because it refers to one person, “**you**.”

4. I don't feel like going to the party. Can we just hang out by ourselves?
 - a. Plural

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? We use the reflexive pronoun “**ourselves**” to refer to the subject “**we**.”

Why did you choose “Singular” or “Plural”? The pronoun is **plural** because it refers to multiple people, “**I**” and “**you**.”

5. The dog keeps biting herself/himself/itself because of the fleas.
 - a. Singular

Why did you choose the reflexive pronoun? We use the reflexive pronoun “**herself/himself/itself**” to refer to the subject “**the dog**.” It should be noted that since the dog's gender is unknown, any of these choices are appropriate because they are all singular.

Why did you choose “Singular” or “Plural”? The pronoun is **singular** because it refers to one noun, “**the dog**.”

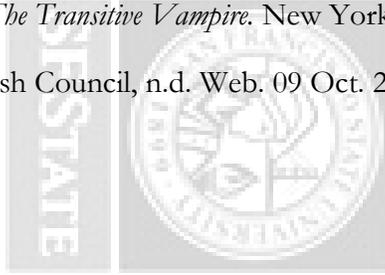
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Works Cited

Gordon, Karen Elizabeth. "Pronouns." *The Transitive Vampire*. New York: Times Books, 1984. Print.

"Reflexive Pronouns." *Learn English*. British Council, n.d. Web. 09 Oct. 2015.



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