Pronoun reference is the relation between a pronoun and its antecedent. A pronoun must refer clearly to its antecedent; otherwise, the reader may become confused.

1. Avoid ambiguous references of pronouns. Ambiguous reference occurs when a pronoun may refer to two different antecedents.

Confusing: Jacob smiled proudly at Jim as he received the silver trophy. (Who received the trophy?)
Clear: As Jim received the silver trophy, Jacob smiled proudly at him.

2. Avoid general reference of pronouns. The antecedent of a pronoun should be a single word or word group, not a general idea. The pronouns this, that, these, those, it, and which tend to be used in a general way and thus should be used judiciously.

Confusing: Ellen was late to work, missed her first appointment, and was reprimanded by her supervisor. This caused her to be disagreeable for the rest of the day.
Clear: These events caused her to be disagreeable for the rest of the day.

Confusing: Good writers usually have large vocabularies, which is why I get poor grades on my essays.
Clear: Good writers usually have large vocabularies; I have an inadequate vocabulary, which is the reason I get poor grades on my essays.


Confusing: In Indiana, they grow corn. (Who are they?)
Clear: In Indiana, the farmers grow corn.

Confusing: My father is an architect; I also have decided to choose it as my profession.
Clear: My father is an architect; I also have decided to choose architecture as my profession.