

Reflexive Pronouns

A *reflexive pronoun* is a specific type of pronoun that is used for the object of a verb when it refers to the same noun as the subject of that verb. In English, these are the pronouns that end with “self” or “selves”: e.g., “himself,” “myself,” “ourselves,” etc. The following can be considered a rule with regards to reflexive pronouns:

If the object and the subject of a verb are the same, use a reflexive pronoun for the object. Otherwise, do not use one.

Proper Usage

An example of proper usage would be:

*Jane shook **herself** awake.*

The meaning of the sentence is fairly clear. Jane was drifting to sleep at a time when she shouldn't be, possibly during class, so she made a sudden movement in order to stay awake. However, if we were to replace the reflexive pronoun with the standard accusative pronoun “her,” the meaning changes:

*Jane shook **her** awake.*

Most English speakers would read this sentence as meaning Jane was shaking someone else, which suggests a different situation entirely.

Improper Usage

A grammatical error that is somewhat common among developing writers is the use of reflexive pronouns when they are not needed, usually in an attempt to appear more formal. Though this does not necessarily impair meaning, it is considered incorrect. An example follows:

*If you have questions, email Bob or **myself**.*

There is no need for a reflexive pronoun here, as the person doing the emailing (“you”) is not the same as the person being emailed. The correct version would be:

*If you have questions, email Bob or **me**.*

Note that the reflexive pronoun has been replaced with the first person accusative pronoun. The meaning is the same either way, but the first is recognized as incorrect and should be avoided. A good way to determine whether you need to use the reflexive pronoun is to apply the same trick that is usually used to check whether your pronouns should be nominative or accusative: break the sentence down. For instance:

*If you have questions, email **myself**.*

Freeing the pronoun from the detritus of the rest of the verb's object makes the problem much clearer. The phrase “email myself” cannot be used in this context, because the only person who can “email **myself**” is “I.” Remember, we only need the reflexive if the subject and the object of the verb are both the same. In this case, the subject is second-person (“you”), and the object is first-person (“**myself**”), so they can't be referring to the same individual.