



Dear Reader,

This month we address a more serious topic: misused pronouns. Staying indoors to avoid frostbite during a numbingly cold Toronto winter frees up plenty of time to reflect on grammar glitches and other language peeves.

On a sunnier note, I look forward to meeting those of you attending the Legal Marketing Association conference in Los Angeles in March. Here's to California dreamin'!



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### Three Simple Pronouns that Are often Misused

1. **I/me.** Many people mistakenly believe that *me* is somehow incorrect when mentioned together with someone's name – or conversely is informally OK. But as ever, it depends entirely on whether you're the subject or object of the verb. The test is simply to see what the sentence would sound like if the other person is omitted.
    - *Wrong:* Peter said he would meet James and *I* in the pub.
    - *Right:* Peter didn't meet James and *me* in the pub.
    - *Wrong:* James and *me* went to the pub to meet Peter.
    - *Right:* James and *I* failed to meet Peter in the pub.
  2. **Myself.** Similarly, some perceive *myself* to be a more formal and elegant way of saying *me*. However, *myself* is a reflexive pronoun, used only when the subject and object of the verb are the same.
    - *Wrong:* James almost tripped and spilled hot soup on *myself*.
    - *Right:* Peter did trip and spill hot soup on *me*.
    - *Wrong:* It's unlikely I would trip and spill hot soup on *me*.
    - *Right:* I might trip and spill hot soup on *myself*.
  3. **They.** *They* is often used as a generic third-person singular pronoun, when the person's sex is unknown or irrelevant. Even Jane Austen followed this practice 200 years ago. But in the eyes of many speakers, *they* is still properly used only as a plural, so it's safer to reword the sentence to avoid this usage. Three alternatives are to use *he or she* or the neutral third-person pronoun *one*, or to recast the sentence in the plural.
    - *Wrong:* If I invite a dinner guest, *they* should bring wine.
    - *Right:* If I invite a dinner guest, *he or she* should bring wine (or chocolates).
    - *Wrong:* If *one* is invited to dinner, *they* should bring wine (or flowers).
    - *Right:* If *one* is invited to dinner, *one* should bring wine (or beer).
    - *Right:* If I invite dinner guests, *they* should bring booze, chocolates and flowers.
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### Buzz Off : *It is what it is*

"It is what it is" is popping up all too frequently in the boardroom and the locker room alike. The current congressional hearings investigating baseball player Roger Clemens' alleged steroid use were even interrupted when one committee member demanded a "parliamentary inquiry" into the origins of this phrase. It's a succinct example of a tautology designed to mean whatever the speaker wants it to mean – a statement of resignation, an expression of defiance, or a fallback when meaningful words fail. What's irritating is that this phrase is often used to close the door on further discussion even though it doesn't explain a thing.

Instead of mechanically saying "It is what it is", you could try a more descriptive phrase appropriate to the point you're trying to make, such as "That's just the way things are", "That's the best we can do", or "I don't see any alternative". And if someone uses this phrase on you, you're well advised to ask what exactly "it" is and not give up until you get a straight answer.

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Is there a buzzword you would like to banish? Send your suggestion to [writer@ecwriting.com](mailto:writer@ecwriting.com), then look for your buzzword and name in an upcoming issue.

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### Parting Words

"I am lapidary but not eristic when I use big words."

– William F. Buckley Jr., American author and conservative commentator, 1925-2008