25

Agreement: The Hard Cases

Subject–verb agreement is trivial until it isn't. This chapter collects the cases that trip up even professional writers, and the principles that resolve them: **grammatical concord** (match the form), **notional concord** (match the meaning), and **proximity** (match the nearest noun — legitimate only in limited cases).

25.1 Collective nouns

team, committee, family, government, staff, audience, board, crew

- AmE strongly prefers the singular: *The committee **has** decided.*
- BrE allows both, by perspective: *The committee **has** decided* (as a body) vs. *The committee **were** divided* (as individuals).
- Be consistent within a text, and keep pronouns aligned: ✗ *The board has changed their policy.* → ✓ *The board has changed **its** policy.*

25.2 Quantified subjects

- *a number of* + plural verb; *the number of* + singular: ***A number of** issues **remain**. **The number of** issues **is** growing.*
- Fractions, percentages, *majority*: agree with the noun after *of*: *Two-thirds of the budget **was** spent; two-thirds of the voters **were** undecided. The majority of members **support** the motion.*
- Measures as a unit take the singular: *Five years **is** a long time. Ten miles **is** too far to walk. Three hundred dollars **seems** fair.*
- *more than one* — singular despite its meaning: *More than one witness **was** present.*
- *many a* + singular: *Many a career **has** ended this way.*
- Arithmetic: *Two and two **is/are** four* — both heard; singular is safer.

25.3 Coordinated and correlative subjects

- *and* → plural: *Oil and water **do** not mix.* Exception — single idea: *Fish and chips **is** my favourite. The hammer and sickle **was** on the flag.*
- *or, either… or, neither… nor* → agree with the *nearer* subject (proximity rule): *Either the manager or the assistants **are** responsible. Neither the assistants nor the manager **is** responsible.* If the result sounds awkward, rewrite: *Either the manager is responsible, or the assistants are.*
- Additive phrases (*as well as, together with, along with, in addition to*) do *not* change the number: *The captain, as well as the players, **was** disappointed.*

25.4 Distance and attraction errors

The most common real-world error: the verb "attracts" to a nearby noun instead of the true head:

- ✗ *The quality of the recordings* ***were*** *poor.* → ✓ *The quality . . .* ***was*** *poor.*
- ✗ *A bouquet of roses* ***were*** *delivered.* → ✓ *A bouquet . . .* ***was*** *delivered.*
- Strip the sentence to head noun + verb to check.

25.5 Special subjects

- Clausal subjects are singular: *That they lied* ***is*** *obvious. Whether we go* ***depends*** *on the weather.*
- Gerund subjects are singular: *Reading novels* ***improves*** *vocabulary.*
- Titles, names of works, and quoted plurals: singular — *"Great Expectations"* ***was*** *serialized. The United Nations* ***has*** *voted. "Thanks"* ***is*** *sometimes all you need to say.*
- Plural-form singulars: *news, politics, economics, mathematics, measles, billiards* → singular: *Economics* ***is*** *useful.* But when meaning practical affairs: *The economics of the deal* ***are*** *shaky. His politics* ***are*** *extreme.*
- Pair nouns: *trousers, scissors, glasses* → plural, unless counted with *pair*: *These scissors* ***are*** *blunt; this pair of scissors* ***is*** *blunt.*
- *police, people, cattle* → plural: *The police* ***are*** *investigating.*

25.6 Agreement with *there*, *it*, and inverted subjects

- *there* + *be* agrees with the following noun: *There* ***are*** *several options.* Informal speech uses *there's* with plurals (*There's two ways to do this*); avoid in writing.
- In full inversion, find the postponed subject: *Among the guests* ***were*** *two senators.*
- Clefts: *It* ***is*** *the details that* ***matter****.* (*it is* fixed; the relative verb agrees with the focus)
- *one of the* + *plural* + *relative clause*: strictly, the clause modifies the plural: *She is one of the few people who* ***understand*** *the system.* (*who understands* is common but resisted by careful editors)

25.7 Pronoun agreement

- *each, every, either, neither, everyone, nobody* → singular verb; follow-up pronoun is now normally singular *they*: *Everyone* ***has their*** *own key.*
- *none of* + plural: singular or plural — *None of the files* ***was/were*** *encrypted* (singular more formal).
- Keep number consistent across a sentence: ✗ *If a student fails, they must retake it, and he should also inform the office.* — pick one strategy throughout.

Exercises

Exercise 25.1 Choose the verb

Select the correct (or better) form; note where both are defensible.

1. The list of ingredients (is / are) printed on the label.
2. Neither the CEO nor the directors (was / were) available.

3. A number of complaints (has / have) been received.
4. Twenty minutes (is / are) all I need.
5. The staff (is / are) unhappy about the rota. (BrE)
6. Politics (make / makes) strange bedfellows.
7. There (was / were) a laptop and two phones in the bag.
8. She is one of those managers who (listens / listen).

Exercise 25.2 Error hunt

Each sentence contains one agreement error; correct it.

1. The bouquet of lilies and roses were left at the door.
2. Each of the proposals have strengths.
3. The committee have submitted its report. (make consistent)
4. More than one candidates were shortlisted.
5. The quality of his arguments and evidence leave much to be desired.

Exercise 25.3 Rewrite to avoid awkward agreement

Rewrite so the agreement is both correct and natural.

1. Either you or your sister (be) responsible for locking up.
2. Neither the tenants nor the landlord (want) the case to go to court.
3. Every doctor and every nurse (have) signed the petition.