

## Subject-Verb & Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

by Chris Folts

Mark passes Joanna in the hallway.

“Hey,” he asks, “what are you up to?”

Oh, I am waiting for someone and their friend. What about you?”

“Me? One of my friends have class at noon and I am about to meet up with him.”

“Cool, cool. Well, have a nice day.”

In our daily modes of speech, very few notice **number agreement**, or the lack thereof.

Joanna unconsciously made the decision to choose a plural pronoun to correspond to the one friend of her friend.

And Mark, in turn, unconsciously accepted what she said as grammatically correct. He then used a plural form of the verb *have* to correspond to his one friend.

If we were to roll the clock back a few minutes and force the two to be grammatically conscious, the conversation would have happened as follows:

“Hey,” Mark asks, “what are you up to?”

“Oh, I am waiting for *Maria* and *her* friend. What about you?”

“Me? *One* of my friends *has* class at noon and I am about to meet up with him.”

“Cool, cool. Well, have a nice day.”

Realizing that she is waiting for the only friend of her friend, Joanna chooses a singular, feminine pronoun to correspond: *her*.

Mark, noting that the person whom he is meeting is only one person, decides to use the singular form of the verb: *has*.

Although these two conscious decisions run contrary to our daily conversational speak, they fall in line with proper number agreement and grammar.

Unfortunately, these common errors with number agreement—subject-verb agreement and pronoun-antecedent agreement—that we hear in our conversations have found their way out of our mouths and into our writing. Fortunately, by knowing the basic rules and the logic behind these rules, you may be able to catch yourself and make the appropriate decisions.

## A. Subject-Verb Agreement

### 1. Make the verb agree with its subject, not with the word that comes between the two.

Example: The *tulips* (pl.) in the pot on the balcony *need* (pl.) watering.

Example: *Leaders* (pl.) in a society *alienate* (pl.) *their* people.

### 2. Treat compound subjects connected by *and* as plural.

Example: Jill's natural *ability* to lead and her *desire* (pl.) to help others *have* (pl.) led her to a career in ministry.

{“Natural ability and her desire” form a compound subject. }

Example: In this simulation, *employees* and the *manager communicate* to achieve similar goals.

{“employees” and “manager” form a compound subject>}

**Exception:** When the parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person or thing, treat the subject as singular.

Example: Sue's *friend* and *adviser* (sing.) *was* (sing.) surprised by her decision.

{ Her friend and adviser are one person, and thus is treated as singular. }

**Exception:** When a compound subject is preceded by *each* or *every*, treat it as singular.

Example: Every *car, truck, and van* (sing.) *is* (sing.) required to pass inspection.

{ Treat this as a combination of three sentences: Every car is required [...], Every truck is required [...], Every van is required [...], where the compound subject is singular. }

### 3. With compound subjects connected by *or* or *nor*, make the verb agree with the subject nearer to it.

Example: A driver's *license* (sing.) or two credit *cards* (pl.) *are* (pl.) required.

Example: Two credit *cards* (pl.) or a driver's *license* (sing.) *is* (sing.) required.

#### 4. Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular.

Indefinite pronouns include: *anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, none, no one, someone, something, etc.*

Example: **Everybody** (sing.) who signed up for the ski trip **was** (sing.) taking lessons.

Example: **Each** (sing.) of the books **has** (sing.) been read.

Example: **Each** (sing.) of these volunteers **was** (sing.) to represent an employee in an experimental business situation.

Example: **Everyone** (sing.) must give up some freedom to be accepted in society because if **he or she does not** (sing.), then society could not exist.

**Note:** The indefinite pronouns **none** and **neither** are considered singular when used alone.

Example: **None** (sing.) **is** (sing.) immune to this disease.  
{ Treat *none* as *no one*, which is singular. }

When these pronouns are followed by prepositional phrases, the pronoun is still a singular subject.

Example: **None** (sing.) of those jobs **requires** (sing.) a college education.  
{ Treat *none* as *not one*, which is singular. }

#### 5. Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

Some collective nouns in the American English language are treated as singular: *jury, committee, audience, crowd, class, troop, family, couple, etc.* They describe a group of persons or things as a *unit*.

Example: The **class** (sing.) **respects** (sing.) the professor.

Example: The **committee** of senators (sing.) **meets** (sing.) weekly.

Example: Our business **team** (sing.) **has** (sing.) submitted the report.

**Note:** The phrase *the number* is treated as singular, *a number* as plural.

Example: **The number** (sing.) of school-age children **is** (sing.) declining.

Example: A **number** (pl.) of children **are** (pl.) attending the show.

**6. Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb.**

Example: There *are* (pl.) surprisingly few *children* (pl.) in our neighborhood.

Example: In the corner *are* (pl.) *a box* of maps *and a globe* (pl.) to be sold.

{ Think of “box” and “globe” as a compound subject. }

**7. Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a subject complement.**

Example: A *tent* and *a sleeping bag* (pl.) *are* (pl.) the required equipment for campers.

{ Remember that “a tent and a sleeping bag” are the compound subject of the verb *are*, not “equipment”. }

**8. Some words that appear plural are usually treated as singular.**

Words such as *athletics*, *economics*, *mathematics*, *physics*, *statistics*, *measles*, *news*, etc. are usually singular.

Example: *Physics* (sing.) *is* (sing.) one of the most challenging courses at this institution.

**Note:** When they describe separate items rather than a collective body of knowledge, these words can be plural.

Example: The *statistics* (pl.) on freshman retention rates *are* (pl.) impressive.

**Note:** Certain nouns in English, such as *data*, *criteria*, *phenomena*, *media*, etc., appear to be singular but are in fact plural nouns in Latin and Greek: *datum*, *criterion*, *phenomenon*, *medium*.

Example: The *criterion* (sing.) by which we will be graded *is* (sing.) unclear.

Example: The *criteria* (pl.) that we used to evaluate each investment risk *are* (pl.) listed on page 3.

Example: Our *data* (pl.) from the first experiment *show* (pl.) that treating the cells with 2,3-BPG significantly inhibited aerobic respiration.

{ *Datum* refers to something that is assumed or known; its usage as the singular form of *data* should be avoided. Try “data point” or “piece of data.” }

## 9. Titles of works and companies are singular.

Example: *Lost Cities* (sing.) *describes* (sing.) the discoveries of many ancient civilizations.

{ “Lost Cities” is the title of a novel. }

Example: *Harley-Davidson* (sing.) *was* concerned with marketing and not *its* (sing.) style of manufacturing.

## B. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

### 1. Do not use plural pronouns to refer to singular antecedents.

Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things: *anybody*, *anyone*, *each*, *either*, *everybody*, *everyone*, *everything*, *neither*, *none*, *no one*, *someone*, *something*, etc. They are treated as singular.

Example: The vials were placed under light to warm *each fly* until *it* (sing.) began to crawl.

Example: To begin with, *Harley-Davidson* (sing.) changed *its* way of manufacturing by using the Japanese methods.

**Note:** Try to avoid sexist pronouns, *i.e.*, pronouns that specify only one gender.

Example: If *anyone* (sing.) *needs* (sing.) to miss class, *he or she* (sing.) will need to contact the professor.

{ Or try “*Students* (pl.) who *miss* (pl.) class will need to contact the professor.” }

Example: It is much easier to be enthusiastic if *everyone* (sing.) knows *his* or *her* (sing.) teammates.

{ Or try “It is much easier to be enthusiastic if *everyone* (sing.) *knows* (sing.) the other members of the team.” }

### 2. Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

Example: The *jury* (sing.) has reached *its* (sing.) decision.

**Note:** There are cases in which the pronoun is clearly not singular.

Example: The *audience* shouted “Bravo” and stamped *their* (pl.) feet.

**3. Treat compound antecedents connected by *and* as plural; for those connected by *or* or *either*, make the pronoun agree with the nearest antecedent.**

Example: *Bruce* (sing.) or *James* (sing.) should receive first prize for *his* (sing.) sculpture.

Example: Neither the *mouse* (sing.) nor the *rats* (pl.) could find *their* (pl.) way through the maze.