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BACK TO THE BASICS: SUBJECT AND VERB AGREEMENT

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

While legal writers must often express difficult ideas, the key to better writing can be as simple as remembering the basics. Sure we all want to write a beautiful sentence. But if your sentence contains a basic error the reader will likely be distracted and miss your eloquence. And, while some things appear simple or basic, they can become more complex. Like subject/verb agreement.

Here's the grammar primer for this month: Subjects and verbs must match in number. Singular subjects take singular nouns; plural subjects take plural nouns. Easy right?

For simple sentences, agreement usually isn't a problem. You can depend on how the sentence sounds to ensure your subject and verb agree.

The professor requires all students to be in class prior to its start time.

Here the singular subject *professor* takes a singular verb *requires*. Easy! That just sounds correct (an onerous if you're in my class).

Legal writers need to create more complex sentences, so relying on our ears won't always

steer us in the right direction. Agreement becomes trickier when subjects become more complex, and writers need to understand some basic agreement rules.

Subjects joined by "and"

For instance, subjects joined by "and" are plural.

Incorrect: *His wife and child was* mentioned in the will.

Here the subject is plural *His wife and child*, but the verb is singular *was*. Remember, when subjects are joined by "and" they take a plural verb. This is true even when the individual subjects are singular (like wife and child).

Correct: *His wife and child were* mentioned in the will.

To ensure you have created a correct sentence, substitute "they" for subjects joined by "and." You would never write, "They was mentioned in the will."



Seemingly compound subjects

Some subjects appear to be plural, but they aren't. For example, sometimes the parts of a subject joined by "and" make up one idea. In those instances, use a singular verb.

Correct: *His wife and beneficiary received* his whole estate.

Likewise, some subjects are joined to other nouns with prepositions like "together with," "as well as," "along with," "but not," "in addition to," and others. In those cases, the subject is still singular.

Incorrect: The *students*, but not the professor, *wants* the class to end early.

Correct: The *professor*, but not the students, *insists* that class begins on time.

Also correct: The *professor*, along with the students, *wants* a break.

Subjects joined by "or" or "nor"

Subjects can also create problems when multiple subjects are joined by "or" or "nor." In those instances, the verb must match the number of the second half of the subject.

Incorrect: The child's grandmother or *her older sisters has been caring for her since her parents started law school*.

Correct: The child's grandmother or *her older sisters have been caring for her since her parents started law school*.

Also correct: The child's older sisters or *her grandmother has been caring for her since her parents started law school*.

Legal writers need to create more complex sentences, so relying on our ears won't always steer us in the right direction.

So, when you see a subject joined by "or" or "nor" simply read only the second half of the subject to hear if the sentence sounds correct.

Subject and verbs separated by other words

Agreement is also tricky when other nouns come between the subject and the verb. In these instances, writers will sometimes match the verb to the other nouns instead of to the subject. This can be especially tricky when the words between the subject and noun are joined by "and" or contain numbers.

Incorrect: A *panel* comprising two judges and two professors *were* introducing time management skills.

Here the subject is singular: a *panel*. It must take a singular verb.

Correct: A *panel* comprising two judges and two professors *was* introducing time management skills.

Collective nouns as subjects

Many writers get tripped up when faced with a collective noun as a subject. When a collective noun acts as a single unit, the collective noun takes a singular verb.

Incorrect: The *jury* **deliberate** on a verdict.

In this example, the *jury* is acting as a single unit, so the plural verb **deliberate** is incorrect.

Correct: The *jury* **deliberates** on a verdict.

When members of a collective noun act as separately, though, the subject takes a singular verb.

Incorrect: A *number* of students **was** late.

Correct: A *number* of students **were** late.

So, the choice of a singular or plural noun can change the meaning of your sentence — the verb tips the reader to whether the group is acting as a whole or if each member is taking individual action. For instance, both “the faculty is divided on a tardy policy” and “the faculty are divided” could be correct. Whether the action was collective or individual would determine the correct verb form.

Money, distance, and measurements as subjects

Measurements as subjects tend to take singular verbs. This is true even when the measurement is plural in form but singular in meaning.

Incorrect: *Thirty* minutes **are** too late to receive credit for the class.

Correct: *Thirty* minutes **is** too late to receive credit for the class.

Many writers get tripped up when faced with a collective noun as a subject. When a collective noun acts as a single unit, the collective noun takes a singular verb.

Verbs and then subjects

Sometimes, writers like to switch the normal word order. Subjects and verbs must still agree in number, however, when the verb comes before the subject.

Incorrect: *Set forth above* **is** *a summary and examples of attendance policy.*

Here the subject is plural *a summary and an analysis*, but the verb is singular *is*.

Correct: *Set forth below* **are** *a summary and examples of attendance policy.*

Indefinite pronouns as subjects

Indefinite pronouns don't refer to a specific person or thing. A few indefinite pronouns can take either a singular or a plural verb, depending on context: “none,” “all,” “most,” “some,” “any,” and “half.”

Correct: *All* her readers **became** better writers.

Other indefinite pronouns tend to take singular verbs: “all,” “any,” “anybody,” “anyone,” “each,” “either,” “everybody,” “everyone,” “everything,” “neither,” “nobody,” “no one,” “none,” “somebody,” “someone,” and “something.”

Incorrect: *Everyone* who read her column better **understand** subject-verb agreement.

Correct: *Everyone* who read her column better **understands** subject-verb agreement.

Conclusion

Now that you understand the basics of subject-verb agreement, and can steer clear of these pitfalls. Your readers won't be distracted and you can spend your time crafting complex and eloquent sentences.

Sources

1 Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer* at 184-87 (3d ed. 2009).

About the Author

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