Subject/Verb Agreement

Subject/verb agreement can seem straightforward for native speakers and others comfortable with English; we know to write “the attorney argues” and “the attorneys argue.” However, some special circumstances can make it more difficult to tell whether a subject and verb really do agree. These complications can arise from the words themselves, or from their order in a particular sentence.

Recognizing plural and singular nouns

Again, the basics are straightforward -- we usually add an “s” to the end of a noun to form a plural (a group of more than one “defendant” constitutes “defendants”) and know the most common irregular plurals (a group of more than one “child” is a group of “children”). But here are a few to watch out for.

Some words you might not realize are singular:

- Words that seem to refer to a group but must be treated like individuals because they are grammatically singular. They are:

  - another
  - anybody
  - anyone
  - anything
  - each
  - either
  - every
  - everybody
  - everyone
  - less
  - little
  - much
  - neither
  - nobody
  - none
  - no one
  - nothing
  - somebody
  - someone
  - something

- For some words, it may help to think of the word split into its parts, so that “everyone” becomes “every one,” “none” becomes “not one,” and so on. This strategy emphasizes that the subject is “one” (“every” indicates which “one” is under consideration) and “one” is obviously singular.
Wrong: “Of all the students in the class, none have taken Latin.”

Right: “Of all the students in the class, none has taken Latin.”

- Words that end in “s” but represent a concept as a whole. Some examples: news, politics, statistics, economics.

Wrong: “Gymnastics are more dangerous than football.”

Right: “Gymnastics is more dangerous than football.”

- Collective nouns that represent a group of individuals acting as a body. Consider the following:

Right: “The Sons of the Revolution has an intertwined relationship with the state.”

Although under ordinary circumstances, “sons” would take a plural verb, in this case the writer has correctly understood that “Sons of the Revolution” is a proper noun referring to one organization as a whole, rather than several particular sons.

Similarly, some common nouns that may represent a group of people acting as one are:

board (of directors) committee corporation couple

court family government jury

majority panel (of judges)

- Note that some of these words should be handled differently if they are used to represent a group of individuals acting separately (see “Some words you might not realize are plural,” below), but that some are always singular; for example, whether it consists of one individual, as in a trial court, or of a body of people, “the court” is regarded as an institution, and therefore takes a singular verb.

Wrong: “The court stated that they were ill-equipped to second-guess the trial court judge’s determination.”

Right: “The court stated that it was ill-equipped to second-guess the trial court judge’s determination.”

This is also true of expressions dealing with time, money, and weight.

Wrong: “Five thousand dollars were awarded to the plaintiff.”

Right: “Five thousand dollars was awarded to the plaintiff.”
Consider such amounts as lump sums rather than individual dollars (pounds, hours, etc.).

Some words you might not realize are plural:

- Words that come from Latin. “Data” and “agenda” are both plural; although they are often treated as singular in informal conversation, for the purpose of professional writing they should be treated with technical accuracy as plural.

  Wrong: “The data does not support this conclusion.”

  Right: “The data do not support this conclusion.”

  Or,

  Right: “The datum does not support this conclusion.”

  Some singular/plural pairs that follow this model: agendum/agenda, criterion/criteria, datum/data, dictum/dicta.

- Collective nouns that represent a group of individuals who are acting independently. Whereas, for example, the word “jury” would take a singular verb when the jurors act in concert (“the jury decided that ...”), it would take a plural verb when differences between the group are emphasized.

  Wrong: “The jury disagrees [among themselves] on this issue.”

  Right: “The jury disagree on this issue.”

  If this construction sounds awkward to you, you might rebuild the sentence with a different subject:

  Right: “The members of the jury disagree on this issue.”

  Note that some collective nouns always take plural verbs. Some examples:

  elderly police poor young

  Right: “The elderly receive special protection under the law.”

Recognizing subjects and verbs in unusual places

In many sentences, the verb immediately follows the subject: “The police officer frisked the suspect.” This form is both common and effective because the close proximity of subject and verb allows the whole sentence to be comprehended quickly. However, variations occur and you
cannot necessarily depend on the subject of the sentence to be the noun just left of the verb. Here are some instances of slightly less common structures.

- **Intervening words**

  Sometimes a group of words that modify the subject will come before the verb. This situation can be tricky, because it will put a noun closely related to the subject right next to the verb. Here’s an example:

  Wrong: “The criminal nature of these incidents do not divest Family Court of jurisdiction.”

  The writer has tried to create agreement, matching a plural noun, “incidents,” with a plural verb, “do not divest.” This mistake is natural because “incidents” appears where we often expect the subject, right before the verb. However, “incidents” actually belongs to a prepositional phrase that modifies an earlier word, “nature,” and the word should agree with that verb:

  Right: “The criminal nature of these incidents does not divest Family Court of jurisdiction.”

  A test: Try saying the sentence without the intervening words: “The criminal nature do not,” or “The criminal nature does not”?

- **Verbs preceding subjects**

  While verbs usually come after subjects, in a few instances you will find them reversed. This is most common in questions (“What is the standard governing municipal tort liability, and which elements must be met to satisfy the special relationship exception to that rule?”) and in sentences beginning with “there.”

  Right: “There is a long history of judicial intervention in public schools since Brown v. Board of Education.”

  Right: “There are several criteria that courts use in deciding whether or not to intervene in public schools.”

  Note that “there” is not the subject of the sentence; look after the verb to find the subject and check for agreement. In the first example, the subject, “history,” is singular, and should be paired with “is.” In the second, the subject, “criteria,” is plural, and should be paired with “are.”

- **Compound subjects**

  Subjects made up of several individual components joined with “and” take plural verbs: “Both New Horizons and Queens Rising have contracts with the state to provide twenty-four-hour care for youth.” However, a couple of special cases exist. Keep an eye out for
introductory words such as “each,” “every,” “either,” and “neither.”

Subjects joined with “and” are plural, but subjects joined with “or” or “nor” are not (necessarily). Consider the following:

Right: “Neither the Office for Civil Rights nor the Human Rights Commission in Vermont is likely to file a court claim against Bennington.”

Although the subject has two elements, “Office for Civil Rights” and “Human Rights Commission,” they do not have an additive quality; see “some words you might not realize are singular,” above, for a discussion of words like “neither.” However, a plural verb is appropriate if the part of the compound subject nearest to the verb is plural. A pair of examples will clarify this:

Right: “Neither the plaintiffs nor the defendant wants to suggest settlement first.”

Right: “Neither the plaintiff nor the defendants want to suggest settlement first.”

The verb in such cases may be singular or plural, but should agree with the nearest part of the subject. Your ear can guide you here; both “defendant want” and “defendants wants” sound wrong, regardless of any subjects they might be paired with.

Finally, when a compound subject involves the word “each” or “every,” use a singular verb. (See “some words you might not realize are singular,” above.)

Right: “Every pleading, written motion, and other paper is required to bear the signature of at least one attorney of record.”