

They, their  
and, but, or

# GRAMMAR

## 10 Make subjects and verbs agree.

In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third). The present-tense ending *-s* is used on a verb if its subject is third-person singular; otherwise the verb takes no ending. Consider, for example, the present-tense forms of the verb *give*:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
FIRST PERSON	I give	we give
SECOND PERSON	you give	you give
THIRD PERSON	he/she/it gives Yolanda gives	they give parents give

The verb *be* varies from this pattern, and unlike any other verb it has special forms in *both* the present and the past tense.

PRESENT-TENSE FORMS OF BE		PAST-TENSE FORMS OF BE	
I am	we are	I was	we were
you are	you are	you were	you were
he/she/it is	they are	he/she/it was	they were

Problems with subject-verb agreement tend to arise in certain tricky contexts, which are detailed in this section.

### 10a Words between subject and verb

Word groups often come between the subject and the verb. Such word groups, usually modifying the subject, may contain a noun that at first appears to be the subject. By mentally stopping at a such modifier, you can isolate the noun that in fact is the subject.

The *samples* on the tray in the lab need testing.

► High *levels* of air pollution damage the respiratory tract.

The subject is *levels*, not *pollution*.

- ▶ The ~~slaughter~~ of pandas for their pelts <sup>has</sup> ~~have~~ caused the panda population to decline drastically.  
The subject is *slaughter*, not *pandas* or *pelts*.

NOTE: Phrases beginning with the prepositions *as well as*, *in addition to*, *accompanied by*, *together with*, and *along with* do not make a singular subject plural. *The governor, as well as his aide, was [not were] indicted.*

### 10b. Subjects joined by *and*

Compound subjects joined by *and* are nearly always plural.

- ▶ Jill's natural ability and her desire to help others <sup>have</sup> ~~has~~ led to a career in the ministry.

EXCEPTION: If the parts of the subject form a single unit, however, you may treat the subject as singular. *Bacon and eggs is my favorite breakfast.*

### 10c. Subjects joined by *or* or *nor*

With compound subjects connected by *or* or *nor*, make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

- ▶ If a relative or neighbor <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ abusing a child, notify the police.
- ▶ Neither the lab assistant nor the students <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ able to download the program.

### 10d. Indefinite pronouns such as *someone*

Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things. Even though the following indefinite pronouns may seem to have plural meanings, treat them as singular in formal English: *anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, none, no one, somebody, someone, something.*

- ▶ Nearly everyone on the panel <sup>favours</sup> ~~favor~~ the new budget.
- ▶ Each of the furrows <sup>has</sup> ~~have~~ been seeded.

A few indefinite pronouns (*all, any, some*) may be singular or plural depending on the noun or pronoun they refer to: *Some of the lemonade has disappeared. Some of the rocks were slippery.*

### 10e. Collective nouns such as *jury*

Collective nouns such as *jury, committee, club, audience, crowd, class, troop, family, and couple* name a class or a group. In American English, collective nouns are usually treated as singular. They emphasize the group as a unit.

- ▶ The board of trustees <sup>meets</sup> ~~meet~~ in Denver on the first Tuesday of each month.

Occasionally, when there is some reason to draw attention to the individual members of the group, a collective noun may be treated as plural: *A young couple were arguing about politics while holding hands.* (Only individuals can argue and hold hands.)

NOTE: When units of measurement are used collectively, treat them as singular: *Three-fourths of the pie has been eaten.* When they refer to individual persons or things, treat them as plural: *One-fourth of the children were labeled "talented and gifted."*

### 10f. Subject after verb

Verbs ordinarily follow subjects. When this normal order is reversed, it is easy to become confused.

- ▶ Of particular concern <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ penicillin and tetracycline, antibiotics used to make animals more resistant to disease.

The subject *penicillin and tetracycline* is plural.

**who, whom** *Who* is used for subjects and subject complements; *whom* is used for objects. (See pp. 39–40.)

**who's, whose** *Who's* is a contraction of *who is*; *whose* is a possessive pronoun. *Who's ready for more popcorn? Whose coat is this?*

**would of** *Would of* is nonstandard for *would have*.

**you** In formal writing, avoid *you* in an indefinite sense meaning "anyone." *Any spectator [not You] could tell by the way John caught the ball that his throw would be too late.* (See pp. 35–36.)

**your, you're** *Your* is a possessive pronoun; *you're* is a contraction of *you are*. *Is that your new motorcycle? You're on the list of finalists.*

#### 44 Glossary of grammatical terms

This glossary gives definitions for parts of speech, such as nouns; parts of sentences, such as subjects; and types of sentences, clauses, and phrases.

If you are looking up the name of an error (sentence fragment, for example), consult the index or the table of contents instead.

**absolute phrase** A word group that modifies a whole clause or sentence, usually consisting of a noun followed by a participle or participial phrase. *His tone suggesting no hint of humor, the minister told us to love our enemies because it would drive them nuts.*

**active vs. passive voice** When a verb is in the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action. The early *bird catches* the early worm. In the passive voice, the subject receives the action: The early *worm is* sometimes caught by the early bird. Often the actor does not appear in the passive-voice sentence: The early *worm is* sometimes caught. (See also pp. 3–5 and 32.)

**adjective** A word used to modify (describe) a noun or pronoun: the *lame* dog, *rare old* stamps, *sixteen* candles. Adjectives usually answer one of these questions: Which one? What kind of? How many or how much? (See also pp. 40–42.)

**adjective clause** A subordinate clause that modifies a noun or pronoun. An adjective clause begins with a relative pronoun (*who, whom, whose, which, that*) or a relative

adverb (*when, where*) and usually appears right after the word it modifies: The arrow *that has left the bow* never returns.

**adverb** A word used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb: rides *smoothly, unusually* attractive, *very* slowly. An adverb usually answers one of these questions: When? Where? How? Why? Under what conditions? To what degree? (See also pp. 40–42.)

**adverb clause** A subordinate clause that modifies a verb (or occasionally an adjective or adverb). An adverb clause begins with a subordinating conjunction such as *although, because, if, unless, or when* and usually appears at the beginning or the end of a sentence: *When the well is dry, we know the worth of water. Don't talk unless you can improve the silence.*

**agreement** See pages 21–25 and 32–34.

**antecedent** A noun or pronoun to which a pronoun refers: When the *wheel* squeaks, *it* is greased. *Wheel* is the antecedent of the pronoun *it*.

**appositive** A noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun or pronoun: Politicians, *acrobats at heart*, can lean on both sides of an issue at once.

**article** The word *a, an, the*, used to mark a noun. (See also pp. 48–51.)

**case** See pages 36–40.

**clause** A word group containing a subject, a verb, and any objects, complements, or modifiers of the verb. See *independent clause, subordinate clause*.

**complement** See *subject complement, object complement*.

**complex sentence** A sentence consisting of one independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses. In the following example, the subordinate clause is italicized: Do not insult the mother alligator *until you have crossed the river*.

**compound-complex sentence** A sentence consisting of at least two independent clauses and at least one subordinate clause. In the following example, the subordinate clauses are italicized: Tell me *what you eat*, and I will tell you *what you are*.

**compound sentence** A sentence consisting of two independent clauses. The clauses are usually joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) or by a semicolon: One arrow is easily broken, but you can't

Dr. Chung insists that her students *be* on time.

We recommend that Dawson *file* form 1050 soon.

### 11d. Voice

Transitive verbs (those that can take direct objects) appear in either the active or the passive voice. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action; in the passive, the subject receives the action.

ACTIVE John *hit* the ball.

PASSIVE The ball was *hit* by John.

Because the active voice is simpler and more direct, it is usually more appropriate than the passive. (See section 2.)

## 12 Use pronouns with care.

Pronouns are words that substitute for nouns: *he, it, them, her, me*, and so on. Four frequently encountered problems with pronouns are discussed in this section:

- pronoun-antecedent agreement (singular vs. plural)
- pronoun reference (clarity)
- case of personal pronouns (*I* vs. *me*, etc.)
- who* vs. *whom*

### 12a. Pronoun-antecedent agreement

The antecedent of a pronoun is the word the pronoun refers to. A pronoun and its antecedent agree when they are both singular or both plural.

SINGULAR The doctor finished her rounds.

PLURAL The doctors finished their rounds.

Writers are sometimes tempted to choose the plural pronoun *they* (or *their*) to refer to a singular antecedent. The temptation is greatest when the singular antecedent is an indefinite pronoun, a generic noun, or a collective noun.

**Indefinite pronouns.** Indefinite pronouns refer to non-specific persons or things. Even though some of the following indefinite pronouns may seem to have plural meanings, treat them as singular in formal English: *anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, none, no one, someone, something*.

In this class everyone performs at his or her [not their] fitness level.

When *they* or *their* refers mistakenly to a singular antecedent such as *everyone* you will usually have three options for revision:

- Replace *they* with *he or she* (or *their* with *his or her*).
- Make the singular antecedent plural.
- Rewrite the sentence.

Because the *he or she* construction is wordy, often the second or third revision strategy is more effective.

▶ When someone has been drinking, <sup>he or she is</sup> they are more likely to speed.

▶ When <sup>drivers have</sup> someone has been drinking, they are more likely to speed.

▶ <sup>Someone who is</sup> When someone has been drinking, they are more likely to speed.

NOTE: The traditional use of *he* (or *his*) to refer to persons of either sex is now widely considered sexist. (See p. 18.)

**Generic nouns.** A generic noun represents a typical member of a group, such as a student, or any member of a group, such as any musician. Although generic nouns may seem to have plural meanings, they are singular.

Every runner must train rigorously if he or she wants [not they want] to excel.

When *they* or *their* refers mistakenly to a generic noun, you will usually have the same three revision options as for indefinite pronouns.

- ▶ A medical student must study hard if <sup>he or she wants</sup> they want to succeed.
- ▶ <sup>Medical students</sup> A medical student must study hard if they want to succeed.
- ▶ A medical student must study hard if they want to succeed.

**Collective nouns.** Collective nouns such as *jury*, *committee*, *audience*, *crowd*, *family*, and *team* name a class or group. In American English, collective nouns are usually singular because they emphasize the group functioning as a unit.

The planning <sup>committee</sup> granted <sup>its</sup> [not *their*] permission to build.

If the members of the group function individually, however, you may treat the noun as plural: *The family put their signatures on the document.* Or you might add a plural antecedent such as *members* to the sentence: *The members of the family put their signatures on the document.*

## 12b. Pronoun reference

A pronoun should refer clearly to its antecedent. A pronoun's reference will be unclear if it is ambiguous, implied, vague, or indefinite.

**Ambiguous reference.** Ambiguous reference occurs when the pronoun could refer to two possible antecedents.

- ▶ When Aunt Harriet put <sup>it</sup> the cake on the table, <sup>the cake</sup> it collapsed.

- ▶ Tom told James, <sup>"You have</sup> that he had won the lottery. <sup>"</sup>  
What collapsed—the cake or the table? Who won the lottery—Tom or James? The revisions eliminate the ambiguity.

**Implied reference.** A pronoun must refer to a specific antecedent, not to a word that is implied but not present in the sentence.

- ▶ After braiding Ann's hair, Sue decorated <sup>the braids</sup> them with ribbons.

Modifiers, such as possessives, cannot serve as antecedents. A modifier merely implies the noun that the pronoun might logically refer to.

- ▶ In Euripides' *Medea*, <sup>Euripides</sup> he describes the plight of a woman rejected by her husband.

**Vague reference of *this*, *that*, or *which*.** The pronouns *this*, *that*, and *which* should not refer vaguely to earlier word groups or ideas. These pronouns should refer to specific antecedents. When a pronoun's reference is too vague, either replace the pronoun with a noun or supply an antecedent to which the pronoun clearly refers.

- ▶ More and more often, especially in large cities, we are finding ourselves victims of serious crimes. We learn to accept <sup>our fate</sup> this with minor complaints.
- ▶ Romeo and Juliet were both too young to have acquired much wisdom, <sup>a fact</sup> which accounts for their rash actions.

**Indefinite reference of *they*, *it*, or *you*.** The pronoun *they* should refer to a specific antecedent. Do not use *they* to refer indefinitely to persons who have not been specifically mentioned.