

**ON THE WEB**

For electronic exercises on subject-verb agreement, go to dial.hacker.com/rules

and click on ► **Electronic Grammar Exercises**

► Grammar

► E-ex 21-1 through 21-3

EXERCISE 21-2

Edit the following sentences, eliminating problems with subject-verb agreement. If a sentence is correct, write "correct" after it. Answers to lettered sentences appear in the back of the book. Example:

Jack's first days in the infantry ~~was~~ ^{were} grueling.

- a. One of the main reasons for elephants poaching are the profits received from selling the ivory tusks.
- b. Not until my interview with Dr. Hwang ~~were~~ other possibilities opened to me.
- c. Of those who die in single-car wrecks, a majority is drunk.
- d. Crystal chandeliers, polished floors, and a navy oil painting has transformed Sandra's apartment.
- e. The board of directors, ignoring the wishes of the neighborhood, has voted to allow further development.
1. Measles is a contagious childhood disease.
2. Of particular concern are penicillin and tetracycline, antibiotics used to make animals more resistant to disease.
3. The presence of certain bacteria in our bodies is one of the factors that determines our overall health.
4. Amelia is the only one of the many applicants who has the ability to step into this job.
5. Neither the explorer nor his companions was ever seen again.

22**Make pronouns and antecedents agree.**

A pronoun is a word that substitutes for a noun. (See 61b.) Many pronouns have antecedents, nouns or pronouns to which they

refer. A pronoun and its antecedent agree when they are both singular or both plural.

SINGULAR Dr. *Samantha McQueen* finished *her* rounds.

PLURAL The hospital interns finished *their* rounds.



The pronouns *he*, *his*, *she*, *her*, *it*, and *its* must agree in gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter) with their antecedents, not with the words they modify.

Steve visited *his* [not *her*] sister in Seattle.

GRAMMAR CHECKERS do not flag problems with pronoun-antecedent agreement. It takes a human eye to see that a plural pronoun, such as *their*, does not agree with a singular noun, such as *logger*, in a sentence like this: *The logger in the Northwest relies on the old forest growth for their living.*

22a Do not use plural pronouns to refer to singular antecedents.

Writers are frequently tempted to use plural pronouns to refer to two kinds of singular antecedents: indefinite pronouns and generic nouns.

Indefinite pronouns

Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific 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	either	neither	somebody
anyone	everybody	nobody	someone
anything	everyone	no one	something
each	everything		

In class *everyone* performs at *his* or *her* [not *their*] own level.



When a plural pronoun refers mistakenly to a singular indefinite pronoun, you can usually choose one of three options for revision:

1. Replace the plural pronoun with *he or she* (or *his or her*).
2. Make the antecedent plural.
3. Rewrite the sentence so that no problem of agreement exists.

- ▶ When someone has been drinking, ^{he or she is} ~~they are~~ likely to speed.
- ▶ When ^{drivers have} ~~someone has~~ been drinking, they are likely to speed.
- ▶ ^{A driver who} ~~When someone~~ has been drinking, ^{is} ~~they are~~ likely to speed.

Because the *he or she* construction is wordy, often the second or third revision strategy is more effective. Be aware that the traditional use of *he* (or *his*) to refer to persons of either sex is now widely considered sexist. (See 17f.)

Generic nouns

A generic noun represents a typical member of a group, such as a typical student, or any member of a group, such as any lawyer. 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 a plural pronoun refers mistakenly to a generic noun, you will usually have the same three revision options as just mentioned for indefinite pronouns.

- ▶ A medical student must study hard if ^{he or she wants} ~~they want~~ to succeed.
- ▶ ^{Medical students} ~~A medical student~~ must study hard if they want to succeed.
- ▶ A medical student must study hard if ~~they want~~ to succeed.

Choosing a revision strategy that avoids sexist language

Because many readers object to sexist language, avoid the use of *he, him*, and *his* to refer to both men and women. Also try to be sparing in your use of the wordy expressions *he or she* and *his or her*. Where possible, seek out more graceful alternatives.

USE AN OCCASIONAL *HE OR SHE* (OR *HIS OR HER*).

- ▶ In our office, everyone works at ^{his or her} ~~their~~ own pace.

MAKE THE ANTECEDENT PLURAL.

- ▶ ^{Employees} ~~An employee~~ on extended leave may continue their life insurance.

RECAST THE SENTENCE.

- ▶ The amount of annual leave a federal worker may accrue depends on ^{his} ~~their~~ length of service.
- ▶ ^A ~~If a~~ child ^{has} ~~is~~ born to parents who are both bipolar, ^{they} ~~he or she~~ have a high chance of being bipolar.
- ▶ A year later someone finally admitted ^{to being} ~~that they were~~ involved in the kidnapping.
- ▶ I was taught that no one could escape the fires of purgatory, ^{who wanted to reach heaven} ~~if they wanted to reach heaven~~.



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The rules on pronoun-antecedent agreement have sparked debates. If you're interested in learning why, go to dianahacker.com/rules

and click on ► **Language Debates**
► **Pronoun-antecedent agreement**

22b Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

Collective nouns such as *jury*, *committee*, *audience*, *crowd*, *class*, *troop*, *family*, *team*, and *couple* name a class or a group. Ordinarily the group functions as a unit, so the noun should be treated as singular; if the members of the group function as individuals, however, the noun should be treated as plural. (See also 21f.)

AS A UNIT

The *committee* granted its permission to build.

AS INDIVIDUALS

The *committee* put *their* signatures on the document.

- The jury has reached ~~their~~ ^{its} decision.

There is no reason to draw attention to the individual members of the jury, so *jury* should be treated as singular. Notice also that the writer treated the noun as singular when choosing the verb *has*, so for consistency the pronoun must be *its*.

- The audience shouted "Bravo" and stamped ~~their~~ ^{its} feet.

It is difficult to see how the audience as a unit can stamp its feet. The meaning here is clearly plural, requiring *their*.

22c Treat most compound antecedents connected by *and* as plural.

Jill and John moved to Luray, where *they* built a cabin.

22d With compound antecedents connected by *or* or *nor* (or by *either* . . . or or *neither* . . . *nor*), make the pronoun agree with the nearer antecedent.

Either *Bruce* or *Tom* should receive first prize for his poem.

Neither the *mouse* nor the *rats* could find *their* way through the maze.

NOTE: If one of the antecedents is singular and the other plural, put the plural one last to avoid awkwardness.

EXCEPTION: If one antecedent is male and the other female, do not follow the traditional rule. The sentence *Either Bruce or Ann should receive first prize for her poem* makes no sense. The best solution is to recast the sentence: *The prize for best poem should go to Bruce or Ann.*

EXERCISE 22-1

Edit the following sentences to eliminate problems with pronoun-antecedent agreement. Most of the sentences can be revised in more than one way, so experiment before choosing a solution. If a sentence is correct, write "correct" after it. Revisions of lettered sentences appear in the back of the book. Example:

Recruiters
The ~~recruiter~~ may tell the truth, but there is much that they choose not to tell.

- a. Every presidential candidate must appeal to a wide variety of ethnic and social groups if they want to win the election.
 - b. David lent his motorcycle to someone who allowed their friend to use it.
 - c. The instructor has asked everyone to bring their tools to carpentry class.
 - d. The parade committee was unanimous in its decision to allow all groups and organizations to join the festivities.
 - e. The applicant should be bilingual if they want to qualify for this position.
1. If a driver refuses to take a blood or breath test, he or she will have their licenses suspended for six months.
 2. Why should we care about the timber wolf? One answer is that they have proven beneficial to humans by killing off weakened prey.