

Supplemental Material: Writing Clearly and Concisely

Grammar and Usage

3.19 Agreement of Subject and Verb

Collective nouns (e.g., *series*, *set*, *faculty*, or *pair*) can refer either to several individuals or to a single unit. If the action of the verb is on the group as a whole, treat the noun as a singular noun. If the action of the verb is on members of the group as individuals, treat the noun as a plural noun. The context (i.e., your emphasis) determines whether the action is on the group or on individuals.

Singular in context:

The number of people in the state is growing.

A pair of animals was in each cage.

Plural in context:

A number of people are watching.

A pair of animals were then yoked.

The pronoun *none* can also be singular or plural. When the noun that follows it is singular, use a singular verb; when the noun is plural, use a plural verb. If you mean “not one,” use *not one* instead of *none* and use a singular verb.

Singular in context:

None of the information was correct.

Plural in context:

None of the children were finished in the time allotted.

but

Not one of the children was finished in the time allotted.

When the subject is composed of a singular and a plural noun joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb agrees with the noun that is closer.

Correct:

Neither the participants nor the confederate was in the room.

or

Neither the confederate nor the participants were in the room.

Incorrect:

Neither the participants nor the confederate were in the room.

If the number of the subject changes, retain the verb in each clause.

Correct:

The positions in the sequence were changed, and the test was rerun.

Incorrect:

The positions in the sequence were changed, and the test rerun.