

Basic Rules of Grammar

1. Subject-Verb Agreement. A verb should always agree with its subject.

1. Subject and verb agree even when words come between them.

The *teacher*, as well as her students, **was** pleased with the results of the test.

The *photograph* with its use of light and shadows **is** especially beautiful.

The *panel of experts* **is** meeting now to discuss the possible causes of the problem.

2. Two or more subjects joined by 'and' take a plural verb.

The *teacher* and the *students* **were** pleased with the results of the test.

3. Singular subjects joined by *or* or *nor* take singular verbs; plural subjects joined by *or* or *nor* take plural verbs.

Neither the *supervisor* nor her *clerk* **was** happy with the salary adjustment.

Neither the *students* nor their *parents* **were** pleased with the tuition rise.

4. When a singular subject and a plural subject are joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb agrees with the subject closer to the verb.

Neither the teacher nor the *students* **were** happy with the results.

Neither the students nor the *teacher* **was** happy with the results.

5. Words ending in *one*, *thing*, or *body* (such as *everyone*, *anyone*, *anything*, *nobody*, *somebody*, etc.) and words such as *each*, *either*, and *neither* take singular verbs.

Everyone involved in planning the annual holiday party **is** here.

6. The agreement of pronouns such as *any*, *most*, *all*, *many*, *more*, *some*, *who*, *that*, and *which* depends on whether the word or phrase to which the pronoun refers is countable or not countable.

Most of the books **were** put on the shelf. (countable noun)

Most of the water **is** in the pail. (uncountable noun)

7. Collective nouns can take singular or plural verbs, depending on whether they are referring to a group as a unit or as individuals.

The *jury* **is** announcing its verdict. (as a unit)

The *faculty* **were** in disagreement over their options. (as individuals)

8. When a sentence begins with *there* or *here*, or when the sentence is in inverted word order, the verb still agrees with the subject, which follows the verb in these arrangements.

There **are** several possible *answers* to the problem.

There **is** one *correct answer to the question*.

Floating along the river *were* several large rafts.

2. Pronoun-Noun Agreement

1. A pronoun must agree in **person** (*I, he, it, they, etc.*) and **number** (singular or plural) with its antecedent (the noun to which it refers). Remember that *who* and *whom* are used to refer to people, and *that* and *which* refer to everything else.

Mr. Smith took *his* work home with *him*.

Mr. Smith and *Mr. Jones* worked hard on *their* projects.

Neither John nor his *parents* enjoyed *their* afternoon. (The pronoun agrees with the subject closest to it - see subject-verb agreement with *or* and *nor*)

The *women* who voted for an increase in pay looked happy.

Each apple was chosen for *its* rosy appearance.

Everyone must finish *his or her* work by Friday.

Note: Since frequent use of *his* or *her* sounds awkward, it may be preferable to substitute plurals: Students must finish their work by Friday.

2. All pronouns must clearly refer to the noun they replace.

NO: Our patients are enjoying the warm days while they last. (does *they* refer to *patients* or *days*?)

YES: While the warm days last, our patients will enjoy them.

3. Do not mix "persons" unless meaning requires it.

NO: To improve *one's* stroke, *you* have to learn the basics.

YES: To improve *one's* stroke, *one* has to learn the basics.

YES: To improve *your* stroke, *you* have to learn the basics.

3. Placement of Modifiers

Always place modifiers as close as possible to the words they modify.

Confusing:

The supervisor told me they needed someone who could type *badly*.

Better:

The supervisor told me they *badly* needed someone who could type.

Confusing:

The fish was found by a fisherman *floating in the river*. (who was floating?)

Better:

The fish was found *floating in the river* by a fisherman.

Or:

The fisherman found the fish *floating in the river*.

Confusing: *Wearing high boots*, the snake failed to injure the supervisor. (the snake is wearing high boots)

Better: *Wearing high boots*, the supervisor was protected from the snake.

Or: Because the supervisor was *wearing high boots*, the snake did not injure him.

4. Use of Apostrophes

The apostrophe is used to indicate either a contraction or possession.

1. When two words are shortened into one, the apostrophe replaces the missing letter. The rule for using an apostrophe with a contraction *always* holds. (*it is* or *it has* = *it's*; *who is* or *who has* = *who's*; *they are* = *they're*; *will not* = *won't* (note change in spelling); *is not* = *isn't*, etc.)

2. When showing possession, add an 's to the owner word. Then, if the word ends in a double or triple s, erase the one after the apostrophe and leave the apostrophe in place.

one table's leg OR several tables' legs

one student's name OR several students' names

one day's work OR several days' work

one woman's job OR several women's jobs (note the plural form women does not use an s)

one boss' house OR several bosses' houses

(Some grammar textbooks recommend keeping the -s's or -ss's ending for words such as *the Jones's party*, *boss's house*, *class's work*, *Congress's motion*, and *Jesus's life* for easier pronunciation.)

3. The exception to the possessive rule is that pronouns show possession *without* the use of 's. (*my*, *mine*, *your*, *yours*, *his*, *her*, *hers*, *our*, *ours*, *their*, *theirs*, *its*, *whose*, etc.)

Compare the use of apostrophes here:

That is *my* book. OR That book is *mine*.

and here:

That is Bob's book. OR That book is Bob's.

They're hoping to increase *their* budget.

It's almost time to give the cat *its* medication.

You're having trouble with *your* car.

(To test whether you should be using *it's* or *its*, replace *it's* with *it is*. If *it is* doesn't fit, use *its*. Note that there is no such word as *its'*.)

4. a. *Don't* use an apostrophe for plurals of regular nouns.

NOT: Several students' went to the meeting.

NOT: The Smith's are on vacation.

4. b. Use an apostrophe for plurals of numerals, letters, and words being named.

He received mostly A's on the papers marked by TA's.

All she heard were no's in response to her proposal.

Exception: We have many things to learn in the 1990s.