

INTEGRATED

USE OF
ENGLISH

FOR TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Edited by

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Chapter 11

Academic Communication IV: Agreement and Consistency in Sentences

Agreement in grammar refers to the situation where the verbal form agrees with the subject. It is sometimes called concord. The statement is made under the assumption that the student can identify the verb and the subject in the sentence. Learn to identify the subject thus: using the verb, ask questions with who, what. Consider the following examples:-

- (1) She ate the food. Who ate the food?
- (2) The book fell down. What fell down?

The identification of the subject helps in determining what verb-form to use in terms of number or quantity. This section is connected with errors in agreement based on inconsistency with regard to certain categories like: numbers, person, gender, tense and voice. These are discussed under subject/verb agreement; pronoun/antecedent, shift in construction.

Subject/Verb Agreement

Singular subjects take singular verbs. The suffix - s is added to verb to indicate singularity with the third person singular as subject. This is straight forward enough, as the following sentences show:-

- (3) She sleeps on the bed.
- (4) The ceremony comes up every two weeks.

Sometimes, nouns or pronouns occur between subject and verb, thus causing some confusion as 5 and 6 show below.

- (5) Groundnuts sold by the road side usually taste good.
- (6) The repetition of these sounds stirs the emotions.

The important thing to note here is that one should identify the subject, no matter where it occurs in the sentence.

Subjects joined by "and" when both refer to the same person take singular verbs. Consider:-

- (7) His mother and best friend was present at the graduation ceremony.

Subject joined by "or", "either...or" and "neither .. nor" take singular verbs.

- (8) Either Okon or his mother is coming.
- (9) Ekaete or Edem goes.
- (10) I have neither a pen nor a pencil.

Sometimes, one of the subjects referred to in a sentence is plural and the other singular, in this case, the verb should agree with a nearer subject.

Example:

- (11) Neither the shape nor the colours have been affected.

12) Neither the colours nor the shape has been affected.

Indefinite pronouns like "one" "everybody", "someone" "each", "every", "anyone", "no one", etc., even when joined with "and" take singular verb.

13) Each of them does have cough.

14) Each goat and each sheep has its own corner in the yard.

15) Everybody in the house has a box.

With regard to questions in relation to these Indefinite articles, certain question tags assume a plural meaning even though they may take a singular verb.

Consider the following:

16) Everybody has a fair chance, didn't they?

17) Everybody is ready, aren't they?

Plurals regarded as a single unit/collective noun take singular verbs as shown in the following:-

18) Twenty years is too long to be sick.

19) The couple is coming home.

20) The majority has made its decisions

21) News is traveling faster than ever before.

Nouns that have plural forms but singular meanings (like in 21 above) sometimes create some problems. Consult a good dictionary if in doubt.

Some other nouns in the same category include:- economics, electronics, measles, mumps and as such, they take singular verbs. Note that they do not have plural forms: furniture, apparatus, luggage, information, knowledge, lightning, traffic, equipment, clothing, laughter, thunder, behaviour, shouting, scenery, etc.

On the other hand plural subjects take plural verbs. For the plural form of the verb the - s suffix is dropped from the verb when used with the third person as subject. Subjects joined by "and" take plural verbs. Consider the following:-

22) Atim and Okon are final year students.

23) Her desk and my chair were returned.

24) The soldier and the nurse have much in common.

25) They live in the same house.

There are exceptions to this rule. A compound subject denoting one person or a single unit takes a singular verb.

Example:

26) The flesh and blood of the world was dead.

27) My best friend and adviser has changed his mind.

"Each", "Every", take singular verbs if they precede singular subjects joined by "and".

28) Every member and officer in the cult was upset.

29) Each cat and dog has its own plate.

A linking verb should agree with its subject not with its complement. Consider the following examples:

30) Excessive absences were the reason for his failure.

31) The reason for his failure was excessive absences.

Do the following exercises associated with verb/subject agreement.

Exercise 1

The following sentences are all correct. Read them aloud, stressing the italicized words. If any sentence sounds wrong to you, read it aloud two or three times so that you will gain practice in saying and hearing the correct forms.

- 1) The *timing* of these strikes was poorly planned.
- 2) There *are* few mangoes and *pears* left.
- 3) A pistol and mortar were missing.
- 4) *Everyone* of my cousins, including *Eka* has long hair.
- 5) Udoh was the *only one* of the drummers *who was* good.

(Adopted from Hodges and Whiten 1964)

Exercise 2

Choose the correct form of the verb within parentheses in each sentence below. Make sure that the verb agrees with its subject according to the rules of formal English.

1. Neither Okon nor Etim (feels, feel) that the evidence is circumstantial
2. Tastes in reading, of course (differs, differ)
3. Everyone of the figures (was, were) checked at least twice.
4. A fountain and an hanging basket (adorns, adorn) the entrance.
5. Neither of them ever (asks, ask) for a second helping.
6. Hidden cameras, which (invades, invade) the privacy of the people (provides, provide) entertainment for many.
7. The study of words (is, are) facilitated by breaking them down into prefixes, suffixes and roots.

Exercise 3

Pronoun/Antecedent

With regard to antecedents, students normally have a few problems. A pronoun should agree in number and gender with its antecedent. This implies that a singular pronoun takes a singular verb as well as singular antecedent.

32. An actor during early rehearsals often *forgets* his lines.

On the other hand, a plural pronoun takes a plural verb as well as plural antecedent.

33. Actors during early rehearsals often *forget* their lines.

Use a singular pronoun to refer to such antecedents as: each, either, neither, one, anyone, everybody, a person etc.

34. Each of these companies had *its* books audited.
35. One has to live with oneself.

Two or more antecedents joined by *and* are referred to by a plural pronoun.

36. Ekaete and Etim lost *their* self-confidence.

Two or more singular antecedents joined by *or* or *nor* are referred to by a singular pronoun.

37. Did Ekaete or Etim lose *his* self-confidence?

With regard to collective nouns, use singular or plural pronouns, depending on the sense in which such a collective noun is used. Try to avoid inconsistency by not treating such nouns as both singular and plural in the same sentence.

Consider the following sentences:-

38. "The choir is writing their own music.

39. The choir is writing its own music.

In 38, the singular verb takes plural pronoun (their) which is inconsistent. But in 39, the singular verb takes a singular pronoun (its) and this makes for consistency in the sentences.

Make the pronoun have the same number as the one it replaces as shown in the following examples:

40. The committee has made its recommendations.

41. My sister stands her ground even when she is wrong.

Use a masculine pronoun to replace a masculine noun, a feminine noun and a neuter pronoun to replace a neuter noun.

42. We saw the man today. He said he will be back later.

43. I visited my sister last week. She just recovered from an illness.

44. The soup is ready. It is very delicious.

Now do the following exercises.

Exercise 4

Choose the correct form of verb and/or antecedent within the parentheses in the following sentences.

1. A person has to decide for (himself/themselves)
2. Everyone must bring (his/their) novel to class
3. Nobody in the class (was/were) willing to give up (their/his) seat.
4. He would just as soon insult a person as look at (them/him)
5. Neither of them will promise (his/their) support for the project
6. The committee (has/have) always voted according to (its/their) consciences.
7. Give this to the lady (that/who) asked for it yesterday.
8. The team had (its/their) back to the wall.
9. The team (are/is) electing (their/its) captain
10. Neither Michael nor Sunday (has/have) completed (their/his) assignments.

Exercise 5

All the following sentences are correct. Change them as directed in parentheses, revising other parts of the sentences to secure agreement of subject verb, pronoun and antecedent.

1. Everyone in our English class thoroughly enjoys the full hour (Change everyone to All Students).
2. Every activity in that class seems not only instructive but amusing (Change Every activity to All activities).
3. Yesterday, one of the auditors was called in to translate some Latin sentences (Change one to two).
4. We were busy following the oral translation in our text books (Change We to Everyone else).
5. A student who often poses questions that provoke thought rather than the professor, Tim replied, whoever heard of *whom* (change questions to a question).

Shift in construction

Sentences should agree in person, voice and tense. Before we go on to show how this should be done, let us explain briefly what each of these categories means.

Person refers to three categories of pronouns with their plural forms.

	Singular	Plural
The first person	I	We
Second person	you	you
third person	he/she/it	they

Voice in grammar refers to forms of the verb showing relation of the subject to the action. Two voices operate in English - passive and active. The former is marked by the morphemes "be" and "en" with the "on" suffixed to the verb. Note that voice is mainly a feature of transitive verbs.

Tense is the grammatical category which relates the time speaking and the time of an action. Three main distinctions of time operate in English - present, past, future. The present tense is generally marked by the "ing" morpheme, the past tense is marked by the "-ed" morpheme and the future marked by "will". Note that there are exceptions to this rule.

Let us now see how shifts in these categories can cause errors and grammatical inconsistencies. Assuming that you now know what these categories mean; try to stick to one person, voice, tense and number in a discourse.

Avoid shifts in person and do not change from one person to the other. In the following examples, the shifts in the person (from "one" to "you" in 46, and from "we" to "you") makes for inconsistency,

46. * When one eats a soup, you feel very satisfied.

47. * We go to the hospital only when you are sick.

The sentences should be corrected as follows:

48. When one eats a soup, one feels very good.

When you eat a soup, you feel very good.

49. We go to the hospital only when we are sick.

Or

You go to the hospital only when you are sick.

In the same way, avoid needless shifts in voice. Stick to either the active or the passive voice depending on which one you started off with.

Consider the following examples:

50. * We like him because he *has been* helpful.

51. * The actress *stood up, sang* a song, and was seated.

These can be corrected as follows:

52. We like him because he *is* helpful.

53. The actress *stood up, sang* a song and *sat down*.

Avoid shifts in tense while expressing a single idea. Stick to the present tense, the past tense or the future tense, depending on what is being discussed. Avoid such sentence construction as:

54. * The subject catalogue gives the subject approach to the library stock so that when you were looking for books on a given subject without any title in mind, you will find out what the library has on that subject.
55. is a mixture of tenses. It should be corrected as follows:
56. The subject catalogue gives the subject approach to the library stock so that when you are looking for books on a given subject without any title in mind, you can find out what the library has on the subject.

Mistakes in construction occur mostly in these three categories. This does not mean that you have no other problems associated with consistent constructions. Since these are the bases, we will just mention in passing that you should generally watch out and avoid shifts in tense and style, throughout not only the sentence but also other larger elements of any discourse.

It is important to note however, that there are exceptions to the rules discussed above. Sometimes, these rules can be broken purposely as is the case with imagery, where shifts in constructions can produce good stylistic effects. We need not go into this here, since it is not relevant in this case.

Exercise 6

Revise the following sentences to eliminate all needless shifts.

1. Let us listen to him for what it is worth; it might help one in your take home assignments.
2. Mary has pretty eyes and an oval face. He was very beautiful.
3. When one asks, How are you? She answered "We are alright".
4. One should listen very carefully to his lecturer if you want to pass your examination.
5. Every wife has a favourite dish that they prepare for their husband.

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