

Guest Column: A Word, Please: Agreement isn't easy

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“Every one of us have a role to play” or “Every one of us has a role to play”? “A bunch of students were waiting outside” or “a bunch of students was waiting outside”? “It is I who am here” or “It is I who is here”? “None of them knows what they’re doing” or “None of them know what they’re doing”?

When you’re minding your grammar, it’s important that your subjects, verbs and pronouns agree with each other. Singular subjects get verbs conjugated in the singular: the cat is. While plural subjects get plural verbs: the cats are. Similarly, singular nouns are represented by singular pronouns: The cat knows it can catch its tail. Plural nouns are represented by plural pronouns: The cats know they can catch their tails.

But agreement isn’t always easy.

Here are some difficult agreement problems and how to navigate them.

“Every one of us has a role to play.” In a sentence like this, “every one of us” clearly represents a plural: It means “we.” But meaning isn’t everything. Sometimes form matters more. Certain terms “share an interesting and often perplexing characteristic: they are usually grammatically singular and often notionally plural,” writes Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage.

Everyone, anyone, anybody, someone and similar indefinite pronouns are the best examples. We say “everyone is” because “everyone” is grammatically singular even though it’s notionally plural. “Every one of us” is a little different because it has both the singular “one” and the plural “us.” But the effect is the same. It’s often better with a singular verb: Every one of us has, not have.

“A bunch of students were waiting outside.” This is similar to the last example — a singular noun (“bunch”) plus a prepositional phrase ending with a plural (“students”). But in this example, the plural object of the preposition has more pull, so the plural verb is better: a bunch of students were waiting outside. That’s because “collecting noun phrases” like “a bunch of,” “a group of” and “a team of” strongly emphasize the plural. As Merriam’s puts it: “When you have a collecting noun phrase before a plural noun, the sense will normally be plural and so should the verb.” Sometimes, a singular verb works better: That bunch of roses is beautiful. A flock of seagulls is overhead. In these situations, go with whichever sounds better to you.

“It is I who am here.” The plural verb “am” is the way to go here, but to understand why, you need to know about relative clauses. Relative clauses start with the relative pronoun “that,” “who” or “which.” These clauses work like adjectives — they add description to a noun or pronoun. In “There’s the car that I like,” the relative clause “that I like” is just adding more information about the noun “car.” Our example sentence “It is I who am here” seems more complicated because we often use “who” as a singular subject: Who is there? But that’s not how “who” works in our example. In a relative clause, “who” can’t upstage the noun — it can only describe it. So “It is I who am here” has the same subject and verb as “I am here.”

“A relative pronoun is supposed to agree with its antecedent in both number and person,” writes Garner’s *Modern American Usage*. “Thus, it’s correct to say ‘It is I who am here,’ not ‘It is I who is here.’”

None of them knows what they’re doing. There’s a popular misconception that “none” is always singular. It makes sense when you consider that it often means “not one.” But “none” can also mean “not any,” which is plural. “‘None takes a singular verb when the writer thinks of it as singular and a plural verb when the writer thinks of it as plural,’ Merriam’s writes. That’s why you can use “knows” or “know” in our example. Choosing the singular “knows,” however, could spare you the wrath of readers who believe the singular verb is required.

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