October 3, 2016
Writing Tip of the Week
Subject-Verb Agreement—Part 2

Agreement is matching the form of one word to another. Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs.

1. **Collective Nouns Take Singular Verbs When the Group Acts as One Unit; Collective Nouns Take Plural Verbs When the Members of the Group Act Separately.**
   Some common collective nouns found in legal writing are:
   - jury
   - committee
   - board
   - audience
   - team
   - majority
   - family
   - crowd
   - number
   - Supreme Court
   - appellate court
   - names of companies/corporations
   - fractions (when used as nouns)

   **A. Collective Nouns Acting as a Single Unit**
   - The jury has reached its verdict.
   - Two thirds of the board is absent.

   **B. Collective Nouns Acting Separately**
   - The jury have all had an opportunity to make their statements.

   ***Note: Often the use of a plural verb with a collective noun sounds awkward. A simple revision might be preferred.***

   **Revision:** The jurors have all had an opportunity to make their statements.

2. **The Collective Noun “Number”**
   An easy way to tell if the collective noun “number” is singular or plural is to check whether “number” is preceded by “a” or “the.” When it is preceded by “a,” the verb should be plural; when it is preceded by “the,” the verb should be singular.
   - A number of jurors are confused by the detective’s testimony.
   - The number of board members is increasing each year.

3. **Nouns Ending in “s” That Are Singular in Meaning Take Singular Verbs.**
   Words that describe a whole concept or body of knowledge, such as “news,” “economics,” or “politics,” usually take singular verbs.
   - The news is making jury selection very difficult.

   ***Note: When words like “statistics” refer to individual facts, they take plural verbs.***
   - Crime statistics indicate that urban environments are becoming more dangerous.

Adapted from: The New St. Martin’s Handbook—Lunsford & Connors
The Legal Writing Handbook—Oates, Enquist, & Kunsch
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