



But I Interrupt Myself

Each year, when I watch the president’s State of the Union address, I like to read the pre-released text of the speech while I watch. Why? Well, first, I’m a nerd. We know this. But I also like to see where and how the president deviates from his prepared remarks and to speculate about the reasons for those choices. Because I teach advocacy and persuasion, reading while I listen also helps me to identify rhetorical techniques that I can use as examples for my students. And—if I’m being completely honest—I’ll admit that sometimes I like to skip to the end to see how much longer the speech will be.

Finally—and this will come as no surprise—I enjoy finding usage errors.

This year, the president and his speechwriters made a common error that I’ll try to help you avoid in your formal legal writing. In listing examples of “voices of unarmed truth and unconditional love,” President Obama identified “the volunteers at the polls who believe every vote should count, because *each* of them, in different ways, *know* how much that precious right is worth.”

The problem? The word *each* (like fellow single indefinite pronouns *anyone*, *anybody*, *either*, *every*, and *none*) is considered a singular noun; it takes a singular verb. Because *each* is the subject of the phrase, the correct usage would be “*each* of them, in different ways, *knows* . . .”

Subject-verb agreement seems basic. Why did the president and his speech-writers err? Well, I can imagine a few possibilities. First, they might not know that *each* is a singular noun. More likely, they may subscribe to the view espoused by more flexible grammarians that, in informal speech, as opposed to formal writing, using the plural verb is acceptable.¹

More often, though, the intervening *them* creates the problem. Although *them* is an object pronoun, not a subject pronoun, it nonetheless might miscue a writer or speaker into treating it as the subject and thus using the plural verb. I call this sort of miscue the *proximity instinct*. It feels natural for the verb to agree with the noun or pronoun that immediately precedes it, even if that noun is not the subject of the sentence.

Because of this proximity instinct, separating the subject and the verb in this way requires a writer to be particularly vigilant about the technicalities of subject-verb agreement. And the subjectw and verb must agree, no matter how lengthy the interruption between the two (which is just one of the reasons that my revision checklist includes the item keep *subject and verb close together*).

You also will encounter this issue when using *neither* or *either*. When either word is (1) used as a pronoun and (2) the subject of the sentence or clause, treat it as singular, even where plural nouns appear between the subject and the verb. For example:

- *Neither* attorney *was* prepared for the defendant’s admission.
- *Neither* of the attorneys *was* (not *were*) prepared for the defendant’s admission.
- *Either* dog *is* responsible for that giant hole in the couch.²
- *Either* of my dogs *is* (not *are*) capable of such destruction.³

Subject-verb agreement with *either* or *neither* may become

more complicated, however, when you use correlatives such as *either/or* or *neither/nor*. There, you frequently have multiple subjects that share one verb. If both subjects are singular, use the singular verb:

- Neither Petey nor Moose *is* (not *are*) a bad dog.
- Either the attorney or her paralegal *knows* (not *know*) what happened.

If both subjects are plural, use the plural verb:

- Apparently, either dogs or cats destroy furniture.

What to do, though, if one subject is plural and the other singular? Follow the proximity instinct, and use a verb that agrees with the subject closest to that verb in the sentence:

- Neither the attorney nor his clients *are* responsible for those costs.
- Either the clients or the attorney *knows* why.

This proximity instinct will lead you astray, however, when you interrupt your subject and verb with longer phrases introduced by such words as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, or *not*:

- Melanie, as well as several of my other friends from law school, *shares* (not *share*) my obsession with the musical *Hamilton*.
- Mary Jo, not the human members of the running group, *leads* (not *lead*) the run on Thursday mornings.

Often, navigating the more treacherous variations on subject-verb agreement simply requires mindful writing. To prevent the proximity instinct from leading you astray—or to avoid an overcorrection where the proximity instinct would be trustworthy—pause, identify the true subject of the sentence, and proceed accordingly.

endnotes

1. Or maybe they’re just not as uptight about these things as I am.
2. Grammatically correct, but factually untrue. It was definitely Petey.
3. Technically true. But I know that Petey did it.



Susie Salmon

Susie Salmon is Assistant Director of Legal Writing and Associate Clinical Professor of Law at The University of Arizona, James E. Rogers College of Law. Before joining Arizona Law, she spent nine years as a commercial litigator at large firms in Tucson and Los Angeles.