



The Writing Lab

Agreement

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

An agreement error means that one part of your sentence is singular, and one part is plural. In most cases, a sentence should be consistent in terms of number (all singular or all plural – not both). Here are some examples:

- The **bag** of toys **are** on the table in the kitchen >>> This sentence has an agreement error because “bag” is singular (1), but “are” is plural (more than 1).
- The **bag of toys is** on the table in the kitchen. >>> This sentence is correct because “bag” and “is” are both singular.
- The **toys are** on the table in the kitchen. >>> This sentence is correct because “toys” and “are” are both plural.
- My **three dogs** have driven me crazy this summer with all of **her** barking >>> This sentence has an agreement error because “three dogs” is plural, and “her” is singular.
- My **dog has** driven me crazy this summer with all of **her** barking >>> This sentence is grammatically correct because “dog” and “her” are both singular. However, the sentence is factually incorrect because I have three dogs, not just one.
- My **three dogs** have driven me crazy this summer with all of **their** barking >>> This sentence is now correct because “three dogs” and “their” are both plural.
- I honestly don’t get **all** of **these** Pokémon Go **fans** and the lengths **he** will go to find those monsters. >>> This sentence has an agreement error because “all,” “these,” and “fans” are plural, but “he” is singular.
- I honestly don’t get **this** Pokémon Go **fan** and the lengths **he** will go to find those monsters. >>> This sentence is correct if the Pokémon Go fan is male (“he”).
- I honestly don’t get **all** of **these** Pokémon Go **fans** and the lengths **they** will go to find those monsters. >>> This sentence is correct because “all,” “these,” “fans,” and “they” are plural.

A Word about Pronouns

Traditionally, a pronoun was expected to match the word it was replacing in terms of **gender** (male or female) and **number** (singular or plural). This matching can be seen in the following examples:

- **A student** who wants to excel at academics and sports must develop **his/her** time management skills. >>> In this example, “student” and “his/her” are both singular.
- **A student** who wants to excel at academics and sports must develop **his** time management skills. >>> In this example, “student” and “his” are both singular. However, in a world where females exist, using male-only pronouns has become outdated and is very rarely done.
- **Students** who want to excel at academics and sports must develop **their** time management skills. In this example, “students” and “their” are both plural.

However, for many writers, the singular pronouns his/her, he/she, him/her structure have become cumbersome, so some writers have replaced those singular words with the plural pronouns their/them/they. Increasingly, writing experts, writing handbooks, and even the dictionary are saying that these plural pronouns are completely acceptable substitutes for singular gender-specific pronouns, even if they don’t match in terms of number.

Therefore, for some, this example is correct even though “student” is singular and “their” is plural:

- **A student** who wants to excel at academics and sports must develop **their** time management skills.

Indefinite Pronouns

Another group of pronouns is called indefinite pronouns which include words such as another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, enough, everybody, everyone, everything, little, much, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something. These indefinite pronouns can be tricky because even though they may sound plural, they are grammatically singular. Here are two ways to handle this information:

- **Everyone** who went to the concert last week got **his/her ticket** refunded when the band didn't show up. >>> "Everyone," "his/her," and "ticket" are both singular.
- **Fans of the Foo Fighters** who went to the concert last week got **their tickets** refunded when the band didn't show up. >>> "Fans," "their," and "tickets" are all plural. Note that the word "tickets" now needs to be plural. Otherwise, the sentence is saying that all of those Foo Fighters fans originally bought **one** ticket.

For some, the following example is correct even though "everyone" is singular and "their" is plural:

- **Everyone** who went to the concert last week got **their ticket** refunded when the band didn't show up.

Here is another example:

- **None** of the puppies wants to sleep in **his/her bed** tonight because there is a thunderstorm and **he/she** is frightened. >>> "None" and "he/she" are both singular.
- The **puppies** do not want to sleep in **their beds** tonight because there is a thunderstorm and **they are** frightened. >>> "Puppies," "their," and "beds" are all plural. Note that the word "beds" needs to be plural. Otherwise the sentence is saying that all of those puppies shared **one** bed.

For some, the following example is correct even though "none" is singular and "their" is plural:

- **None** of the puppies want to sleep in **their bed** tonight because there is a thunderstorm and they are frightened.

My Best Advice

This issue of using they/them/their in place of singular pronouns is controversial. Some readers will consider such usage as grammatically incorrect because the sentence includes both singular and plural terms. Others will find the usage completely acceptable. If writing in more formal situations or for writers who seem very traditional in their language, use, I would work to keep your sentence all in the singular **or** all in the plural.

In most cases, there is a very easy solution: Just write in the plural to begin with. There isn't a significant difference between the two sentences; both versions are in agreement with each other. Everyone wins.

- A **writer** who wants to influence **his/her** readers will pay attention to issues of agreement.
- **Writers** who want to influence **their** readers will pay attention to issues of agreement.