

Subject, Meet Verb

Notes from the newsroom on grammar, usage and style. (Some frequently asked questions are [here](#).)

Every couple of months I find myself writing a new admonition about subject-verb agreement. The rules of grammar haven't changed since the last time, nor have the typical causes of our agreement problems. The most common difficulty is a phrase or clause separating the subject and the verb, which throws the writer and editor off track. When a sentence is long and complex, be on guard for agreement problems — and even if the parts all match up, consider whether a simpler or more streamlined sentence might be stronger.

Here are a few of the latest lapses (for some reason, our coverage of Sarah Palin's e-mail trove had several missteps):

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A scan of Ms. Palin's e-mails in the weeks just before and after she was chosen as Mr. McCain's running mate on the Republican ticket — among some 24,000 pages of them released by the State of Alaska on Friday — show in minute detail how she went overnight from being a small-state governor who was midway through her first term to a dominant figure in Republican politics.

Somewhere in the vast stretch of 37 words between subject and verb, we lost track of what the subject was. Make it "scan ... shows" — or better still, break the sentence into more manageable parts.

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Later in that same story:

The release here of Ms. Palin's e-mails — which are sprinkled with mentions of God and Palinisms like "flippin" as a G-rated exclamation — were an extraordinary event in their own right, providing the sort of intimate look into a governor's day-to-day interactions that is rarely available to the public.

Same story, same problem. The long interpolation between subject and verb led us astray.

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The release of Ms. Palin's e-mails add nuance and depth to the portrait of a major political figure — and possible Republican presidential candidate — who is almost frozen in the perceptions of many of her supporters and her critics.

There's no long, winding detour here. But even a simple prepositional phrase can distract a writer and editor and lead to a subject/verb mismatch.

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The extraordinary success of "Born This Way" — it outsold the next 42 albums on Billboard's chart combined — are a testimony to Lady Gaga's appeal and the hard work of her business team, which devised one of the most extensive and savvy marketing campaigns ever mounted in music.

After the detour in the dashes, we circled back to the verb — and made it plural instead of singular.

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The F.B.I., which oversees the Joint Terrorist Task Force, whose agents and police detectives generally investigate such matters, declined to pursue the case and have said little about it.

O.K., you get the idea. We do this a lot.

•••

Here in Washington, one of only a handful of states that has not charged entrance fees to state parks, the revenue stream is about to change.

This is a different problem, a variation on another common subject/verb mix-up. The relative clause is not a description of Washington, but of the

group of states of which Washington is one. The relative pronoun “that” is plural, agreeing with “states.” So the verb should be plural, too: “a handful of states that have not charged entrance fees.”

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The chance to avenge the Mavericks’ defeat in the 2006 finals to the Wade-led Heat has provided more than enough incentive for Nowitzki, one of two Mavericks, along with Jason Terry, who was in a Dallas jersey then.

The awkward insertion of “along with Jason Terry” makes this even harder to parse correctly. But the relative clause describes the “two Mavericks” — explaining what they have in common. So it should be “two Mavericks ... who were in Dallas jerseys then.”

More Agreement Trouble

Mismatches between pronouns and their antecedents are another common failing. A few examples:

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No longer just a piece of jewelry, a tongue stud can carry a magnet that allows someone to steer a wheelchair by moving their tongue.

The plural “their” disagrees with the singular “someone.” We try to avoid both the outdated “his” and the cumbersome “his or her” in such references. But in precise usage, we should also avoid “their” as a singular. Usually the solution is a slight rewrite — here, for example, we could substitute “users” for “someone.”

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Mr. Iyer denied it [the company] had a curriculum tailored to the course and said about 70 percent of their tutoring was geared toward standardized tests.

Another common problem is the use of “their” or “them” referring back to a singular entity like “the company” or “the administration.” Here, make it “its.”

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*Using a hashtag is also a way for **someone** to convey that **they’re** part of a certain scene. ...*

*Jane Olson, the senior vice president of marketing and brand strategy for Oxygen Media, said **her network** began using hashtags in **their** advertising in late 2010.*

In the first sentence, replace “someone” with a plural like “users.” In the second, replace “their” with “its.”

In a Word

This week’s grab bag of grammar, style and other missteps, compiled with help from colleagues and readers.

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*But Woods, 35, has not won a tournament since November 2009, when he was first embroiled in a sex scandal. His fall from grace left golf fans with a void, hoping for the next big thing and wondering **whom** it would be.*

Make it “who.”

• • •

*The scandal has caused divisions between police officers, who expect to be hit the hardest, and superiors, **whom** many say were often the drivers of the ticket-fixing practices.*

Make this one “who,” too. It’s the subject of “were.”

• • •

And, in that effort, perhaps no other European leader has come under the same pressure to display leadership, or under the same scrutiny for failing to do so, than Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, the steward of Europe's most powerful economy.

Make it “same … as,” of course, not “same … than.” Perhaps untangling the sentence structure would have helped, too.

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The state grand jury that heard evidence against the men declined to indict them on the charges of second-degree conspiracy as a crime of terrorism and as a hate crime, rejecting the prosecution’s assertion that they had plotted to blow up synagogues while there were worshipers inside. Instead, the panel favored lesser charges that suggested that the defendants, at best, had wanted to destroy a synagogue when it was empty.

Surely “at best” is not the sense we intended. “At worst” would work, or perhaps “at most.”

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Since then, questions have been raised about deceptive tactics used by the Medill students, about allegations that Mr. Protess cooperated with the defense lawyers (which would negate a journalist’s legal privilege to resist subpoenas) and, most damning, whether he altered an e-mail to cover up that cooperation.

To make the sentence parallel, delete the second “about” or insert a third before “whether.”

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What always struck me about Baylor’s ringless career is that after retiring nine games into the 1971-72 season because of knee injuries, the team took off.

A dangler. The team did not retire nine games into the season.

•••

Another tile installer, Luigi Calcaterra, added: “Think about that kid who got made fun of, that his mom and dad are both boys, and the kid’s catching a beating everyday.”

In this adverbial sense, use two words: “every day.” (As one word, “everyday” is an adjective, e.g., “It’s an everyday occurrence.”)

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The computer, known as “K Computer,” is three times faster than a Chinese rival that previously held the top position, said Jack Dongarra, a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville who keeps the official rankings of computer performance.

The stylebook advises against this ambiguous construction:

times less, times more. Writers who speak of *three times more* or *three times faster* often mean “multiplied by 3,” but precise readers are likely to understand the meaning as “multiplied by 4”: the original quantity or speed, plus three more times. For clarity, avoid *times more*, *times faster*, *times bigger*, etc. Write *four times as much* (or as fast, etc.). And do not write *times less* or *times smaller* (or things like *times as thin* or *times as short*). A quantity can decrease only one time before disappearing, and then there is nothing left to decrease further. Make it *one-third as much* (or as tall, or as fast).

•••

While Mr. Bloomberg lavished other family members with multimillion-dollar residences, Mrs. Bloomberg declined, choosing to stay in the simple two-story home that she and her husband, William, bought more than 60 years ago.

The direct object of “lavish” should be the thing with which one is generous, not the recipient: “He lavished attention on her.”

• • •

*As Lynn Peril tells it in “Swimming in the Steno Pool,” her light, wry history of the secretarial profession, the winner was a woman whose boss asked her to take pictures of him before, while and after he shaved off his **moustache**.*

We spell it “mustache” (it’s in the stylebook).

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After Deadline examines questions of grammar, usage and style encountered by writers and editors of The Times. It is adapted from a weekly newsroom critique overseen by [Philip B. Corbett](#), the associate managing editor for standards, who is also in charge of The Times’s style manual.