

# Grammar at a Glance *Job Aid*

COMMAS • APOSTROPHES • SUBJECTS & VERBS • PRONOUNS & ANTECEDENTS

These four pages focus on common problems with commas, apostrophes, subjects and verbs, and pronouns and antecedents. Keep this job aid at your desk for easy reference.

## Commas

### RULE 1

Put a **comma** before a **coordinating conjunction** (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) to join two sentences.

Make it your goal to make a difference, **and** you will enjoy your work.

I know what happiness is, **for** I have done good work.  
—Robert Louis Stevenson

### RULE 2

Use a **comma** after an **introductory word group**.

**Most important of all**, you have to believe in yourself.

**Before we bought new chairs**, we studied ten different models.

### RULE 3

Use **commas** to separate **items in a series**.

Our team consists of **eight people from HR**, **one engineer**, and **two salespeople**.

The employees at Monet's Catering are all **food stylists**, **registered dietitians**, **cookbook editors**, or **personal chefs**.

### RULE 4

Use a **comma** to separate two or more **equal adjectives** when they modify the same noun.

We proposed a **reliable**, **efficient** solution.

We also sent samples to all the **interested gift** shops in Atlanta.

#### Writer's Tip

Two tests help identify **equal adjectives**.

1. Switch the order of the adjectives. If the sentence is still clear, the adjectives are equal.  
My employees are **creative**, **professional** people.  
My employees are **professional**, **creative** people.
2. Place **and** between the adjectives. Does the sentence still sound all right? If so, the adjectives are equal.  
We help clients open **small and innovative** shops.  
We help clients open **small**, **innovative** shops.

### RULE 5

#### Essential and Nonessential Word Groups

Use **commas** with **nonrestrictive word groups** (word groups that **are not essential** to the basic meaning of a sentence). If you remove this word group, the meaning of the sentence remains clear.

E-mails to our customers, **which number about 300 per day**, have increased our profits about 30 percent. (The word group gives additional information, but it is not essential.)

The Lothar bid, **which arrived on Tuesday**, has the lowest labor cost. (The word group adds information, but it is not essential.)

Don't use **commas** with **restrictive word groups** (word groups that **are essential** to the basic meaning of a sentence). If you remove this word group, you would remove information that is necessary, and the sentence's meaning would become unclear.

Salespeople **who are trained to write persuasive e-mails** have larger sales than salespeople **who are not trained**. (The word groups tell which salespeople. Both are essential to the meaning of the sentence.)

The bid **that arrived on Tuesday** has the lowest labor cost. (The word group tells which bid. It is essential to the meaning.)

#### Writer's Tip

**Which** is often used to begin **nonessential** word groups.

**That** is often used to begin **essential** word groups.

## WRITE for BUSINESS

For more on commas, see *Write for Business* pages 258–261.

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# Apostrophes

Apostrophes help you show ownership. In general, singular nouns take an 's and plural nouns take just an apostrophe. Note the following examples and exceptions.

	Add an <b>APOSTROPHE</b> and an <b>S</b>	Add an <b>APOSTROPHE</b> <i>without</i> an <b>S</b>
<b>RULE 6</b> <b>Singular Nouns</b>	Brent's résumé today's meeting a girl's bicycle everyone's input Bank of Madison's policies President Olson's speech Season's greetings	Jones' report Achilles' heel Perkins' apple pies Brahms' lullabies  <b>Note:</b> When the possessive is not pronounced with a separate syllable, leave off the additional <b>s</b> .
<b>RULE 7</b> <b>Plural Nouns</b>	<b>Irregular Nouns</b> ( <i>do not end in s</i> ) children's menu men's shirts women's conference alumni's reunion mice's predators	<b>Regular Nouns</b> the employees' parking lots the puppies' pedigrees the girls' bicycles the elm trees' leaves my bosses' offices
<b>RULE 8</b> <b>Compound Nouns</b>	editor in chief's remarks (singular) brother-in-law's job (singular) brothers-in-law's jobs (plural)	stockholders' meeting (plural) salesclerks' priorities (plural) vice presidents' dividends (plural)
<b>RULE 9</b> <b>Joint Ownership</b>	Bert, Sara, and Ben's report ( <i>All work together on one report.</i> )  Bert's, Sara's, and Ben's reports ( <i>Each has his or her own report.</i> )	employees and visitors' parking lot ( <i>Both use one lot.</i> )  employees' and visitors' parking lots ( <i>Each group has a separate lot.</i> )
<b>Note:</b> Do <b>not</b> use an apostrophe to show possession with a pronoun. Possessive pronouns change their forms. The possessive form of <i>it</i> is <i>its</i> (not <i>it's</i> , which is the contraction for <i>it is</i> or <i>it has</i> ). The possessive form of <i>who</i> is <i>whose</i> (not <i>who's</i> , which is the contraction for <i>who is</i> or <i>who has</i> .)		

## WRITE for BUSINESS

For more on apostrophes, see *Write for Business* pages 270–272.

## WRITE for BUSINESS

For more on subject-verb agreement, see *Write for Business* pages 323–325.

# Subject-Verb Agreement

A singular subject needs a singular verb, and a plural subject needs a plural verb. This is called subject-verb agreement. Note the examples and exceptions below.

	SINGULAR VERBS	PLURAL VERBS
<b>RULE 10</b> <b>Singular Subjects</b>	<b>Eric</b> often <b>closes</b> large deals. <b>He gives</b> clients great service. Face-to-face <b>instruction adds</b> depth and richness to training.	
<b>RULE 11</b> <b>Plural Subjects</b>		Self-paced <b>courses provide</b> training. <b>We train</b> every employee.
<b>RULE 12</b> <b>Compound Subjects</b> (two or more nouns) with <b>and</b>		<b>Credibility and trust build</b> client relationships. Both our <b>managers and CEO support</b> employee initiatives.
<b>RULE 13</b> <b>Compound Subjects</b> (two or more nouns) with <b>or</b>	<b>Two single subjects</b> Either our <b>CEO or president supports</b> each project.  <b>One single &amp; one plural subject</b> <b>Injuries or sickness creates</b> many absences. <i>(Though this is correct, it may often sound incorrect.)</i>	– <b>OR – Sickness or injuries create</b> many absences. <i>(Place the plural subject nearest the verb because it sounds correct.)</i>
	<b>Note:</b> The verb must agree with the subject closest to the verb.	
<b>RULE 14</b> <b>Indefinite Pronouns</b>	<b>Singular indefinite pronouns:</b> <i>anybody, anything, everybody, everyone, somebody, someone, something, nobody, nothing, no one</i>  <b>Everyone agrees</b> that mentoring is something <b>everyone needs</b> to succeed. <b>Nobody expects</b> special treatment.	<b>Plural indefinite pronouns:</b> <i>both, few, many, others, several</i>  <b>Both</b> of the shipments <b>are</b> delayed. <b>Many were</b> invited.
	<b>Some indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural:</b> <i>all, any, more, most, none, some.</i> Look at the <b>object of the preposition</b> to select the verb.  <b>All</b> of the <b>fund has</b> been spent. <b>All</b> of the <b>funds have</b> been spent.	
<b>RULE 15</b> <b>Plural-in-Form Nouns</b>  (Nouns plural in form but singular in meaning)	<b>Economics is</b> a course of study.  <b>Note:</b> Many nouns ending in <i>-ics</i> ( <i>mathematics, physics, ethics</i> ) are singular if they refer to learning.  <b>Is</b> the <b>news</b> worth hearing?  <b>Note:</b> Nouns like <i>news, measles, lens,</i> and <i>summons</i> take singular verbs.	<b>Economics drive</b> our hiring process.  <b>Note:</b> In this sentence, <i>economics</i> does not refer to learning, so a plural verb is used.  Our <b>earnings are</b> above average.  <b>Note:</b> Nouns like <i>scissors, dues, savings, proceeds, goods,</i> and <i>odds</i> take plural verbs.

# Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

The word that a pronoun refers to or replaces is called its antecedent. A singular pronoun needs a singular antecedent, and a plural pronoun needs a plural antecedent. Note the examples and exceptions that follow.

	SINGULAR PRONOUNS	PLURAL PRONOUNS
<b>RULE 16</b> <u>Singular Antecedents</u>	<p>I like <b>my</b> new computer.</p> <p><b>Jim</b> writes <b>his</b> speeches.</p> <p><b>Sue</b> told us that <b>she</b> wants to speak.</p> <p><b>Jacie</b> said, "Rob, please give <b>me</b> directions."</p> <p><b>Charles, you</b> must list <b>your</b> expenses.</p> <p>Each <b>company</b> had <b>its</b> own health policy. (not <i>their</i>)</p>	
<b>RULE 17</b> <u>Plural Antecedents</u>		<p>Most <b>customers</b> receive <b>their</b> bank statements via e-mail. <b>They</b> like the convenience.</p> <p><b>We</b> listed <b>our</b> expenses.</p>
<b>RULE 18</b> <u>Two or more antecedents with and</u>		<p><b>Rob and Susan</b> want to practice <b>their</b> presentation. <b>They</b> need an audience.</p>
<b>RULE 19</b> <u>Two or more antecedents with or</u>	<p>Either <b>Bev or Joan</b> will move <b>her</b> car.</p> <p>Either the <b>manager or our supervisor</b> will bring <b>his</b> laptop. (Both the manager and the supervisor are males.)</p> <p>Either several <b>legislators or Mrs. Bain</b> will use <b>her</b> influence.</p>	<p>Either the <b>Randalls or the Longs</b> will move <b>their</b> car.</p> <p>Either <b>Mrs. Bain or several legislators</b> will use <b>their</b> influence.</p>
<b>Note:</b> The pronoun must agree with the closer antecedent.		
<b>RULE 20</b> <u>Indefinite Pronouns</u>	<p><b>Singular indefinite pronouns:</b> <i>anyone, anybody, anything, each, each one, everyone, everybody, everything, someone, somebody, something, either, neither, no one, nobody, nothing, one, another</i></p> <p><b>Everybody</b> must submit <b>his or her</b> report.</p>	<p><b>Plural indefinite pronouns:</b> <i>both, few, many, others, several</i></p> <p><b>Both</b> received an award for <b>their</b> research.</p>
<p><b>Some indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural:</b> <i>all, any, more, most, none, some.</i></p> <p>Look at the <b>object of the preposition</b> to select the pronoun that matches.</p> <p><b>Most</b> of the <b>report</b> has been written, but <b>it</b> needs to be edited.</p> <p><b>Most</b> of the <b>employees</b> take <b>their</b> vacations in August.</p>		

### Writer's Tip

When you refer to both sexes, you may offer optional pronouns or rewrite the sentence. Most writers rewrite to avoid optional pronouns.

- A **person** may choose **his or her** health plan. (*optional pronouns*)
- Our **employees** may choose **their** health plans. (*rewritten sentence*)

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For more on pronoun-antecedent agreement, see page 325.

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