

Concord: Noun Number

NUMBER AGREEMENT IN SUBJECT AND RELATED NOUN

Here's a problem that we often encounter with two nouns that are related (usually by possession) to each other: When the subject is plural, how do we refer to the second noun when it's logically only one? In "From the Other Side of the Generation Gap," we find sentences that use either singular or plural form for the second noun. (In the following sentences from that article, the subject has a single underline and the possessed element has double underline.)

Singular second noun

... more than half the grandparents had seen a grandchild within the last week

... the tendency in working-class families for young married couples to move near where the wife's mother lives

Plural second noun

Young women with children. . . expect their mothers to help them pick up the pieces.

... the older women resented the numerous phone calls and visits from their grown daughters,

... [grown daughters] often turned to their mothers for advice.

In only 10 percent of American families do grandparents live with their children. . .

... the reserachers found that [young husbands] encouraged closeness with their wives' families.

When we write: Should we say "daughter" or "daughters" in "Grandmothers often resent the impositions of their daughter(s?) on their time"?

"Distributive Plural"

from *Practical English Usage*, by Michael Swan (Oxford)

507 singular and plural (8): distributive plural

1. people doing the same thing

To talk about several people each doing the same thing, English usually prefers a plural noun for the repeated idea.

*Tell the kids to bring **raincoats** to school tomorrow.*

(More natural than *Tell the kids to bring **a raincoat***. . .)

Plural forms are almost always used in this case with possessives.

*Tell the children to blow **their noses**.* (NOT . . . ~~*to blow their nose*~~.)

*Six people lost **their lives** in the accident.*

Uncountable nouns cannot of course be used in the plural.

*They were all anxious to increase their **knowledge**.*

(NOT... ~~*their knowledges*~~.)

For singular and plural forms after *every*, see 199.

2. repeated events

In descriptions of repeated single events, singular and plural nouns are both possible. When no details are given, plural nouns are more natural.

*I often get **headaches**.* (NOT ~~*I often get a headache*~~.)

*She sometimes goes for **rides** over the hills.*

When details of the time or situation are given, nouns are often singular.

*I often get **a headache** when I've been working on the computer.*

*She often goes for **a ride** over the hills before supper.*

Singular nouns may also be used to avoid misunderstanding.

*I sometimes throw **a stone** into the river and wish for good luck.*

(NOT ~~*I sometimes throw stones*~~. . . — only one stone is thrown each time.)

To refer to the time of repeated events, both singular and plural expressions are often possible with little difference of meaning.

*We usually go and see my mother **on Saturday(s)**.*

*He's not at his best **in the moming(s)**.*

3. generalisations and rules

In generalisations and rules, singular and plural nouns are both possible.

We use **a past participle** in **a perfect verb form**.

OR We use **past participles** in **perfect verb forms**.

Mixtures of singular and plural are possible.

Subjects agree with their **verb**.

Children usually inherit some characteristics from **their father** and some from **their mother**.

This often happens when fixed singular expressions like *at the beginning* are used.

Discourse **markers** usually come **at the beginning** of **sentences**.