

Good Writing Practice

Grammatical misagreement in number

Part II - Subject to non-verb constituents

Introduction

In addition to subject-verb misagreement in grammatical number, a misagreement in number is common between a subject and other sentence constituents, which appears in the experimental and contextual sections of a journal article.

Experimental sections

Part 1 – Materials and Methods section: Method

Example: Singular subject antecedent – plural referent

Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move their centre of gravity.

Revision 1

Before data acquisition, **all individuals** were instructed about how to move **their** centre of gravity.

Revision 2

Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move **his or her** centre of gravity.

Notes

Can the possessive plural pronoun *their* be used as a singular? The use of the plural *their* is a hypercorrection to avoid the sexism of *his* and the awkwardness of repeated *his* or *her*. In the example, the singular pronoun *each* as a subject determiner intensifies the misagreement with the plural referent (*their*) and sounds awkward.

Transformation of the subject into the plural (*all individuals*) avoids the two distractions (hypercorrection and awkwardness). Although the revision is focused on individuals and not on each individual, the meaning is essentially the same. However, *all individuals* would not apply to just two or three individuals. Instead, *the three individuals* would suffice.

In Revision 2, minimal repetition of **his and her** with the focus on the singular is recommended, because the singular is usually more readily comprehended than the plural.

Part 2 – Materials and Methods section: Method

Example: Coordinated modifiers – singular subject

Transporter clones 2 and 3 expression was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

Revision

Transporter **clone** 2 and 3 expression **each** was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

Notes

In the example *clones* not only primarily convey that there are two clone types, but also secondarily that there may be more than one clone of clone 2 and clone 3. Although context, convention, or science familiarity may eliminate such a distraction, in the Revision no such distraction is incurred by use of *each*.

Part 3 – Results section: Result statement/ observation

Example: Coordinated modifiers – singular subject

In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic treatments of infection prevented continued

Revision 1

In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic **combined treatment** of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

Revision 2

In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic **sequential treatment** of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

Notes

In this example, it is uncertain whether the symptomatic and prophylactic are combined or in sequence. In the revisions, the combined (Revision 1) and sequential (Revision 2) relation is explicit.

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Part 4 – Results section: Result statement/ observation

Example: Plural subject – singular direct object

All patients had an enlarged heart.

Revision 1

Every patient had an enlarged heart.

Revision 2

Each patient had an enlarged heart.

Notes

In the example, the image of many patients sharing one heart is distracting. Just as implausible is *all the patients had enlarged hearts* (more than one per patient).

Revision 1 is a compromise: the grammatical singularity of *every* (but the connotation of more than one patient) and the singular *heart* is less distracting.

In Revision 2, *each* is the most un-nuanced revision, supporting a principle that misagreement in number can often be achieved by focusing on the singular.

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: Research problem pertinent background

Example: Singular subject – plural subject complement

The second indication of apoptosis is changes in morphologic features.

Revision

The second indication of apoptosis is **a change** in morphologic features.

Notes

The difference in grammatical number between

the subject *indication* and the subject complement *changes* creates a dissonant distraction? The inverse of the example is also a distraction: *Changes in morphologic features is the second indication of apoptosis*. The subject is connected to its complement by a linking verb, whereas to a direct object, by a transitive verb.

Part 2 – Introduction section: Objective

Example: Plural modifier – singular subject

The root mice development model at the bell stage was used to identify normal DLx3 gene expression and protein localisation.

Revision

The root **mouse** development model at the bell stage was used to identify normal DLx3 gene expression and protein localisation.

Notes

Why doesn't *mice* development sound right? Maybe because *mice* convey the nuance of a specific group of mice rather than the generic singular (*mouse* development). Some other examples are *tooth* (not *teeth*) development; *transition* (not *transitions*) frequencies.

Part 3 – Introduction section: Research problem pertinent background

Example: Plural subject – singular modifier

Different types of fibre are components of connective tissue.



Revision 1

Different types of **fibres** are components of connective tissue.

Revision 2

Different **fibre types** are components of connective tissue.

Notes

In Revision 1, the plural modifier of *fibres* matches the plural modifiee *types* as would *these fibres* rather than *this fibres*. Probably, the adjective *different* necessitates a plural: either *types of fibres* or *type of fibres*.

In Revision 2, when the modifier *fibre* appears before the modifiee *types*, the singular seems to be the only choice (not *fibres types*).

Summary

Modifier-caused misagreement in number is more common (n=4) than either complement (n=2) or referent-caused (n=1) misagreement. Most of the misagreements result in a dissonance, but the misagreement in number resulting from the coordination of subjects or modifiers is more severe resulting in impeded immediate comprehension.

Options for revision involve changing the number of the subject or the constituent, usually to the singular – maybe for its simplicity.

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Schematised misagreement in number distractions and preferred revisions

Between modifier and subject

Transporter clones 2 and 3 expression was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.
→ Transporter **clone** 2 and 3 expression **each** was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic treatment of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.
→ In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic **combined treatment** of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.
→ In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic **sequential treatment** of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

The root mice development model at the bell stage was used to identify normal DLx3 gene expression and protein localization.
→ The root **mouse** development model at the bell stage was used to identify normal DLx3 gene expression and protein localization.

Between subject and modifier

Different types of fibre are components of connective tissue.
→ Different **fibre types** are components of connective tissue.

Between subject and direct object

All patients had an enlarged heart.
→ **Each** patient had an enlarged heart.

Between subject and subject complement

The second indication of apoptosis is changes in morphologic features.
→ The second indication of apoptosis is a **change** in morphologic features.

Between subject and referent

Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move their centre of gravity.
→ Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move **his or her** centre of gravity.