

Verbs Sandwiched Between Singular and Plural Nouns



Dealing with distracting predicate nouns.

By Bonnie Mills, read by Mignon Fogarty, [Grammar Girl](#)

August 14, 2009

Episode #183



Today, Bonnie Trenga will help us talk about tricky sentences that make you question whether you should use a singular or plural verb.

Today we're talking about a tricky kind of sentence that causes you to make a mistake with subject-verb agreement. As we all learned in school, a singular subject agrees with a singular verb, and a plural subject agrees with a plural verb. Sometimes, though, other parts of the sentence get in the way and confuse you. Here's an example of the kind of sentence we're talking about: "The star attractions at the museum were the art." Or should it be "The star attractions at the museum was the art"?

Defining Our Problem

Before we can answer the "were" or "was" question in the museum sentence, we need to define the problem. The source of the conundrum is what's called a distracting predicate noun. A predicate is what provides information about the subject (1). In the museum sentence, the predicate noun is "the art," a singular word. The subject, "the star attractions," on the other hand, is plural. So should the verb agree with the subject or the predicate noun?

Solving Our Problem

Although this problem may seem complicated, it's really not. It's as simple as this: the verb agrees with the subject (2), not the predicate noun. Therefore, "were" is correct in the museum sentence because the subject is "the star attractions," a plural noun:

The star attractions in the museum were the art.

Dorothy, don't pay attention to the man behind the curtain, meaning don't be distracted by the predicate noun. One grammar source calls this problem "false attraction to a predicate noun" (3).

Let's try out one more example. What's the right verb here:

The real draw of this restaurant is the desserts.

or

The real draw of this restaurant are the desserts.

Well, you know not to be falsely attracted by "the desserts," which is the predicate noun. Instead, let's identify the subject; it's "the real draw," which is singular. Therefore, the verb must be "is":

The real draw of this restaurant is the desserts.

What comes after the "is" doesn't matter.

Sandwich image, [Christian Cable at Flickr](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)

Next: How to Avoid the Problem



[How S-Backing Causes People to Pronounce 'Street' as 'Schtreet'](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)



[When Celebrities Gossip About Their Spouses' Grammar?](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)



[Freelance Story Ideas](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)



[Winning Haiku](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)

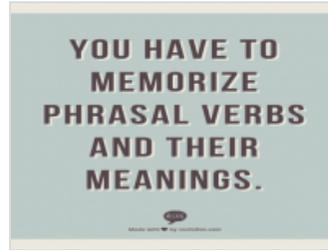
You May Also Like...



[Is It OK to Switch Verb Tenses?](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)



[Mixing Verb Tenses](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)



[Phrasal Verbs](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)



[Why Does "I" Take Plural Verbs?](#)
[Grammar Girl](#)

An advertisement for Grammarly's Instant Grammar Checker. It features the Grammarly logo at the top left. Below it, the text "Instant Grammar Checker" is displayed. Underneath, there are several lines of placeholder text with a red checkmark, a red X, and a red squiggle indicating corrections. At the bottom, there is a prominent red button with the text "Try Now".



Add a comment...



Ginny Maskill · Ypsilanti, Michigan

His voice, his music, his band - makes me feel good inside.

Like · Reply · Jun 3, 2014 12:09pm



Herman Johnson

OK, 1960's English class. Mrs Malone: Never use the two words "Gramatically" and "correct" in conjunction. Gramatically means structurally correct. So you are saying "it is structurally correct correct". Was she gramatically correct?

Like · Reply · May 2, 2014 6:48am



Grammar Girl

"Grammatical" means "structurally correct." "Grammatically" is an adverb, and I wouldn't say it means "structurally correct." The sentences "That sentences is grammatical," and "That sentence is grammatically correct," mean the same thing.

Like · Reply · May 3, 2014 12:08pm



Barb Drake · University of Florida

Thanks for this clear explanation. I edit books for a scholarly press, and sometimes this issue trips me up as well!

Like · Reply · Sep 27, 2013 2:13pm



KB Gardener · Author at Author

How about, "Her legs are her best feature"?

Like · Reply · Sep 26, 2013 9:15am



Jen Zordan · Porter and Chester Institute

This is my pet peeve, right behind using apostrophes in plural nouns.

Like · Reply · Sep 26, 2013 8:46am