

## Usage: Summary of Rules

### UWF Writing Lab

RULE 1: Subjects and verbs (or predicates) must agree in number. A singular subject takes a singular verb; a plural subject takes a plural verb.

NOTE: The subject does not necessarily have to precede the verb. It may be found anywhere in a sentence:

Along the row of houses was planted a lone palm tree.

(Tree is the subject, singular, and agrees with the singular verb was planted.)

RULE 2: There is never a subject. It may be an adverb or an expletive. (As an expletive it does not function except to point out or indicate presence.)

There go six of the students now.

(Six is the subject, plural, and agrees with the plural verb go; there is an adverb.)

There is only one person here now.

(Person is the subject, singular, and agrees with the singular verb is; there is an expletive.)

RULE 3: The following indefinite pronouns used as subjects are singular and take singular verbs: any, anyone, anybody, anything, someone, somebody, something, everyone, everybody, one, no one, nobody, nothing, each, either, neither. (These signify each individual separately.)

Nothing is that important.

(No one thing is that important.)

RULE 4: The following indefinite pronouns are plural: few, several, some, both. (These signify more than one individual collectively.)

Both are welcome.

RULE 5: Collective nouns are singular in form but may be singular or plural in meaning; so when used as subjects, they take their verb form from their meaning.

The committee is seated. (as a unit)

The committee have disagreed among themselves. (Obviously, members are considered individually here; so the verb is plural, indicating separate individual action rather than collective action as one unit.)

NOTE: Ordinarily a collective noun in its singular form takes a singular verb.

RULE 6: The object of a preposition is not a subject. The noun or pronoun following a preposition is NEVER a subject.

The flock of geese flies South each year. (flock, subject, singular--not geese.)

The flocks of geese fly over our house. (flocks, subject, plural--not geese.)

The head of the organization is the man to see. (head, singular, subject--not organization.)

RULE 7: Modifying phrases are not subjects.

The textbook, as well as the reference books, is difficult to read. (The phrase as well as the reference books is not part of the subject; subject book, singular agrees with is, singular.)

RULE 8: When either or neither is used as a subject, the verb is singular.

Either of the books is acceptable.

Neither of the boys is allowed to go.

RULE 9: When either/or or neither/nor is used as a connective, the verb takes its form from the subject closer to it.

Neither Tom nor the boys are to blame. (are, plural, agrees with boys)

Either the boys or Tom is to blame. (is, singular, agrees with Tom)

RULE 10: Doesn't is the contraction for does not and is singular, while don't is the contract for do not and is plural. There's is the contraction for there is.

They don't want us here.

It doesn't annoy me.

There's no one here. (There is no one here.)

RULE 11: Compound subjects (two or more subjects) take plural verbs.

NOTE: If the same person is indicated by two different titles, the verb is singular.

The boy and his parents were leaving. (Compound subject)

The secretary and treasurer was giving her report. (One person holding two offices)

The secretary and the treasurer were going over the accounts. (two people)

RULE 12: Words that represent units are used singularly and take singular verbs.

Mathematics is difficult for me. (There is no form of mathematic.)

Ten miles is a long walk. (Ten miles is considered as a unit.)

RULE 13: All past participles (third principal part of a verb) must have helping verbs to be used as predicates or verbs of a sentence.

I have seen the man. (Right)

I seen the man. (Wrong)

RULE 14: The past tense of a verb does not take a helping verb.

I have saw the man. (Wrong)

I saw the man. (Right)

RULE 15: The following verbs come in pairs. One form can take an object. It can carry the action from the subject to something else. The other form cannot take an object. It cannot carry the action of the subject to anything else.

I was laying the book on the table. (Laying carries the action from the subject I to the book.)

I have been lying down today. (Lying cannot carry the action to anyone else. So there is not an object in the sentence)

The principal parts of the pairs of verbs that cannot take objects and that can:

No Object

lie, lying

lay

lain

rise, rising

rose

sit, sitting

sat

sat

Objects

lay, laying

laid

laid

raise, raising

raised

set, setting

set

set

RULE 16: However, the verbs lay, raise, and set take objects except when used in the passive voice.

I laid the pen on the desk.  
The pen was laid on the desk.  
He set the vase by the lamp.  
The vase was set by the lamp.  
Mary raised her hand in answer to the question.  
Mary's hand was raised in answer to the questions.

RULE 17: Shall is used for first person singular and plural, and will for second and third persons singular and plural for expressing ordinary future time. The forms are reversed to express promise or determination.

I shall leave early. I promise you I will leave early.  
She will come tomorrow. There is no doubt; she shall be here tomorrow.

RULE 18: Use may for permission; can for ability.

May I borrow the car?  
Can you open the door?

RULE 19: Leave means to let alone or to abandon; let means to permit.

Leave the dishes on the table.  
Please let me help you.

RULE 20: Could of is never correct; the form is could have. Of is not a verb; it is a preposition.

I could of gone. (Wrong)  
I could have gone. (Right)

RULE 21: Ought has no past participle. It is incorrect to say hadn't ought.

I ought not to have been there. (Right)

RULE 22: Ain't is never correct.

RULE 23: Get, got, gotten are correct forms when the verb means to receive. It is not correct to use any form of these verbs as parts of another verb.

He got wounded. (Wrong)  
He was wounded. (Right)

He got four dollars from me. (Right)

I have got ten cents. (Wrong)  
I have ten cents. (Right)

RULE 24: And is never part of a verb.

Try to remember the rule. (Right)  
Try and remember the rule. (Wrong)

RULE 25: Learn means to acquire knowledge; teach means to instruct someone else.

He is teaching me tennis. (Right)  
He is learning me tennis. (Wrong)  
I am learning tennis. (Right)

RULE 26: A pronoun used as the subject of a sentence is always in the nominative case (I, you, he, she, it, they, who, we)

I (he, she, it) was present.  
They were gathering berries.

RULE 27: A subject may be compound.

The boys and I will be late.

RULE 28: In a question, reverse the wording to make a statement in order to see the construction better. Thus:

Who is it? It is who. (subjective complement)

RULE 29: The nominative case of pronouns (I, you, she, he, it, we, you, they, who) is used in one other structure--as a predicate nominative or subjective complement. A predicate nominative means the same as the subject and frequently follows a form of the infinitive to be (am, is, are, was, were, and forms ending in be or been).

The girl might have been she.

RULE 30: There can be compound predicate nominatives as well as compound verbs and subjects.

The girls might have been Mary and she.

RULE 31: When a pronoun is used as an appositive to a noun or pronoun in the nominative case (used either as a subject or as a predicate nominative) it is in the nominative case. An appositive means the same as the word it immediately follows.

The girls, Mary and she, are here now.  
(Mary and she means the same as girls and immediately follow the subject girls)

It was the twins, Homer and he.  
(Homer and he mean the same as twins and immediately follow the predicate nominative twins.)

RULE 32: The objective case is used when the noun or pronoun is a direct object. The direct object is the person, place, or thing receiving the action of the verb from the subject.

I saw him.

RULE 33: Reverse for a question:

Whom did you want? You did want whom? (direct object)

RULE 34: The objective case is used for an indirect object. An indirect object is the person, place, or thing to whom or for whom something is done without expressing for or to. An indirect object can always be tested by placing to or for before it.

I read him the book. (book, direct object)  
I read (to) him the book. (him, indirect object)

I made her the dress. (dress, direct object)  
I made for her the dress. (her, indirect object)

Whom did they give book?  
They did the book (to) whom? (whom, indirect object)

RULE 35: The objective case is used for an object of a preposition. Any word introduced by a preposition becomes the object of the preposition.

I sat between Jack and him. (compound objects of the preposition between)

For whom is this book? (object of the preposition for)

RULE 36: Objective case is used when the pronoun or noun is in a apposition with a noun or pronoun in the objective case.

They scolded the boys, Tom and he.  
(in apposition to a direct object)

They gave the girls, Kathy and her, the candy.  
(in apposition with an indirect object)

The picture is of the twins, Carol and her.

(In apposition with an object of the preposition.)

RULE 37: When a close appositive is a noun, determine the use of the pronoun in the sentence for its case.

We girls shall be ready by ten.

(We is the subject, nominative case; girls is the noun appositive.)

They gave the candy to us children.

(Us is the object of the preposition to, objective case; children is the noun appositive)

RULE 38: Pronouns must agree in number, gender, and person with antecedents. Take care here to remember which indefinite pronouns are singular and which are plural.

The boys brought their papers.

John brought his papers.

Everyone must bring his papers.

All must bring their papers.

RULE 39: Reflexive and intensive personal pronouns (myself, yourself, himself, itself, herself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves) are used for emphasis or to point out the receiver of a reflex action, an action the subject performs upon itself.

They themselves will swear to it. (intensive)

He talks to himself. (reflexive)

RULE 40: Reflexive pronouns are never used as subjects.

John and myself will be glad to see you. (Wrong)

John and I will be glad to see you. (Right)

RULE 41: Adjectives have degrees: positive, comparative, superlative, such as good, better, best. The comparative degree is used to compare two; the superlative for more than two.

He is the younger of the two brothers. (comparative)

He is the tallest boy in the class. (superlative)

RULE 42: Do not use an adjective for an adverb. The adverbial form of an adjective frequently ends in “ly” and is used to modify a verb.

The river runs swiftly. (adverb)

It is a swift river. (adjective)

RULE 43: Use a predicate adjective to describe the subject after such verbs as seem, look, feel, taste, smell, sound, become, and any verb form of to be.

The music sounds loud.  
The violets smell fragrant.

RULE 44: Sure is an adjective meaning “secure,” “safe,” “certain”; surely is an adverb meaning certainly, truly.

Can you be sure?  
He is surely a good driver.

RULE 45: Good is an adjective; well is an adverb.

He has done well.  
He is a good student.

RULE 46: Real means “genuine, not an imitation”; very means “in high degree.”

It was very funny. (or really funny; NOT real funny)  
This is a real first edition.

RULE 47: Do not use double negatives. Negatives are no, not, none, nothing, nowhere, nobody, and contractions containing not.

I couldn't do anything. (Right)  
I couldn't do nothing. (Wrong)

RULE 48: Hardly and scarcely are not real negatives but should not be used with negatives.

I have scarcely any time. (Right)  
I have scarcely no time. (Wrong)

RULE 49: Almost means “nearly.” Most means “the greatest number, largest part.”

Do you have most of the answers?  
I have almost all my work done.

RULE 50: Somewhat is an adverb; some is not an adverb. (adjective, pronoun)

It was somewhat correct.

RULE 51: This and that are the only adjectives in the English language which have a plural form and must agree with the word they modify.

Please pass me some of that kind of jelly.  
I have some of those kinds of apples.

RULE 52: Healthy refers to a physical state or condition; healthful refers to conditions which promote health.

Part of South America has a healthful climate.  
I have a healthy dog.

RULE 53: Between is used when speaking of two persons or things. Among is used when speaking of more than two persons or things.

She divided the candy among the eight children  
She divided the candy between the two children.

RULE 54: Do not use superfluous prepositions.

She fell off the chair. (not off of)  
The chairman was seated opposite me. (not opposite to)  
The committee sat back of or behind us. (not in back of)  
Where are my keys? (not keys at)

RULE 55: On the other hand, do not omit prepositions that are necessary to the meaning and structure of the sentence.

In that way you will be sure to succeed.  
On the first day we were pleased to find the driving easy.

RULE 56: Never confuse personal pronouns in the objective case with adjectives.

Those people were our friends.  
(NEVER: Them people were our friends.)