

The Collective Noun

Recognize a *collective noun* when you see one.

Nouns name people, places, and things. *Collective nouns*, a special class, name *groups* [*things*] composed of *members* [usually *people*]. Check out the chart below:

army	council	minority
audience	department	navy
board	faculty	public
cabinet	family	school
class	firm	senate
committee	group	society
company	jury	team
corporation	majority	troupe

Use correct verbs and pronouns with collective nouns.

Each noun from the list above is a single *thing*. That thing, however, is made up of *more than one person*. You cannot have a committee, team, or family of *one*; you need at least two people to compose the unit.

Because people behave as both herd animals and solitary creatures, collective nouns can be either singular or plural, depending on context. In writing, this double status often causes agreement errors. How do you tell if a collective noun is singular or plural? What verbs and pronouns do you use with the collective noun?

Here is the key: Imagine a flock of pigeons pecking at birdseed on the ground. Suddenly, a cat races out of the bushes. What do the pigeons do? They fly off *as a unit* in an attempt to escape the predator, wheeling through the sky in the same direction.

People often behave in the same manner, doing one thing *in unison* with the other members of their group. When these people are part of a collective noun, that noun becomes singular and requires singular verbs and pronouns. As you read the following examples, notice that all members of the collective noun are doing the *same* thing at the *same* time:

Every afternoon the baseball **team follows its** coach out to the hot field for practice.

Team = singular; **follows** = a singular verb; **its** = a singular pronoun. All members of the team arrive at the same place at the same time.

Today, Dr. Ribley's **class takes its** first 100-item exam.

Class = singular; **takes** = a singular verb; **its** = a singular pronoun. All members of the class are testing at the same time.

The **jury agrees** that the state prosecutors did not provide enough evidence, so **its** verdict is not guilty.

Jury = singular; **agrees** = a singular verb; **its** = a singular pronoun. All members of the jury are thinking the same way.

Now imagine three house cats in the living room. Are the cats doing the same thing at the same time? Not this group! One cat might be sleeping on top of the warm television. Another might be grooming on the sofa. A third animal might be perched on the windowsill, watching the world outside. There is *one* group of animals, but the members of that group are all *doing their own thing*.

Members of collective nouns can behave in a similar fashion. When the members are *acting as individuals*, the collective noun is *plural* and requires plural verbs and pronouns. As you read these examples, notice that the members of the collective noun are *not* acting in unison:

After the three-hour practice under the brutal sun, the **team shower**, **change** into **their** street clothes, and **head** to **their** air-conditioned homes.

Team = plural; **shower**, **change**, **head** = plural verbs; **their** = a plural pronoun. The teammates are dressing into their individual outfits and leaving in different directions for their individual homes.

After the long exam, the **class start their** research papers on famous mathematicians.

Class = plural; **start** = a plural verb; **their** = a plural pronoun. The students are beginning their own research papers—in different places, at different times, on different mathematicians.

The **jury disagree** about the guilt of the accused and **have told** the judge that **they** are hopelessly deadlocked.

Jury = plural; **disagree**, **have told** = plural verbs; **they** = a plural pronoun. Not everyone on the jury is thinking the same way.

Whenever you cannot decide if a collective noun is singular or plural, exercise your options as a writer. You have two ways that you can compose the sentence without causing an agreement error: 1) insert the word **members** after the collective noun [**jury members**, **committee members**, **board members**], or 2) use an entirely different word [**players** instead of **team**, **students** instead of **class**, **soldiers** instead of **army**]. Then you can use plural verbs and pronouns without worrying about making mistakes or sounding unnatural.



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