

THE CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTION

Recognize a correlative conjunction when you find one.

Either ... or, neither ... nor, and not only ... but also are all correlative conjunctions. They connect two equal grammatical items. If, for example, a **noun** follows *either*, then a noun should also follow *or*.

Read these examples:

In the fall, Phillip will **either** start classes at the community college as his mother wishes **or** join the Navy, his father's hope.

Neither the potted ivy on the counter **nor** the dirty dishes in the sink have enjoyed a single splash of water this week.

Professor Wilson **not only** requires a 3,000-word research essay **but also** assigns a 500-word reaction paper every single week.

Subject-verb agreement can be tricky with correlative conjunctions.

When you connect two **subjects** with correlative conjunctions, the *second* subject agrees with the **verb**.

Every single evening **either** the horned owl **or** the squabbling **cats** **wake** Samantha with their racket.

Every single evening **either** the squabbling cats **or** the horned **owl** **wakes** Samantha with its racket.

In the first sentence, **cats**, a plural subject, is in the second position, so you must use **wake**, a plural verb. But if **owl** (singular) is closer to the verb, then **wakes** (singular) is correct.

Correlative conjunctions also make pronoun agreement tricky.

If you connect two **antecedents** with correlative conjunctions, the *second* antecedent agrees with the **pronoun** that follows.

Neither Yolanda **nor** the **cousins** could contain **their** disappointment when Aunt Sophie served burnt hamburgers for dinner.

Neither the cousins **nor** Yolanda could contain **her** disappointment when Aunt Sophie served burnt hamburgers for dinner.

Her—even though it is correct—might strike readers as strange in a sentence that includes multiple people. To keep your readers comfortable, use the *plural* antecedent in the second position so that you can then choose the natural **their**.

Correlative conjunctions require parallel structure.

Either ... or, **neither ... nor**, and **not only ... but also** require special attention when you are proofreading for **parallelism**. Be sure that you have equal grammatical units after both parts.

For example, you can have two **main clauses** like this:

Not only did Michael grill a steak for Tiffany, **but** he **also** prepared a hotdog for Rocket, her dog.

Or you can shorten the sentence with two **prepositional phrases**:

Michael grilled meat **not only** for Tiffany **but also** for Rocket, her dog.

Or you can have two **nouns** as this version does:

Michael grilled meat for **not only** Tiffany **but also** Rocket, her dog.

