CHAPTERS 3 AND 4
QUICK COURSE IN GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

At some point in their college careers, many journalism majors discover that their knowledge of grammar isn’t as sharp as they thought. They find themselves guessing whether a sentence needs a comma. Or worse, they’ve had grammatical errors in their work pointed out to them by editors during internships or by professors in writing and editing classes.

This crash course may help. We give you enough terminology for you to talk sensibly about grammar. Along the way, we tackle the most common grammar problems.

First we look at the parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions. Then we move on to phrases and clauses. You’ll find a couple of exercises after each section. The answers to the first exercise in each section are in the back of the book.

We aren’t going to claim that studying grammar is fun. We won’t even claim it’s the most important part of your journalism education. It is, however, the most fundamental. We contend that reporters who write grammatically correct stories have a better chance of keeping a job than reporters who don’t. And we’re sure you won’t go far as a copy editor if you haven’t mastered the basic rules of good grammar.

SECTION 1: NOUNS, PRONOUNS AND AGREEMENT

Nouns name people, places and things. The italicized words in the following sentences are nouns. Notice that a word can be a noun in one sentence and a modifier in another. For example, computer is a noun in the first sentence. In the second sentence, it modifies the noun programs.

Computers have improved the accuracy of tax forms prepared by individuals, according to an IRS representative.
Each April, millions of Americans buy computer programs to help them prepare their taxes.

Pronouns replace nouns. We usually think of pronouns as words such as he, she, it, they, his, her, its and so on. The noun that the pronoun replaces is called its antecedent. The pronouns are italicized in these sentences:

The prosecutor told him that his client failed to answer her questions.
The department assigned its best investigators to question them about their crimes.

Sometimes words such as that, which, who and whom can be pronouns, as in the following sentences:

John Jones, who founded Express Airlines, was a pilot for Pan Am, which stopped flying in 1992.
She worked for a company that manufactured explosives for the military.

Who, which and that take the place of the nouns John Jones, Pan Am and company. The writer did not have to repeat those words in the sentences.

Vague pronoun references can be confusing, as in this sentence:

The university told the city it needed more police officers.

Does the pronoun it refer to city or to the university. Perhaps the university thinks the city is crime-ridden and needs more cops. Or does the pronoun it refer to university? The university is saying its own
police department is too small. To clear up vague pronoun references, you can repeat the correct noun or recast the sentence:

Repeating noun: The university told the city that the university needed more police officers.
Recast: The city needs more police officers, a university representative said.
Recast: The university needs more police officers, a university representative told the City Council.

Two or more nouns can be the subject of a sentence. In those cases, we use plural verbs to agree with the subject. We say, “Jim and Betty are,” not “Jim and Betty is.” Here are more examples:

Not: The five Republicans and Johnson has objected.
But: The five Republicans and Johnson have objected.

Not: The five men and seven women of the jury was polled.
But: The five men and seven women of the jury were polled.

Collective nouns such as jury, group, corporation, team and committee are almost always singular in American English even though they represent lots of people: A jury may have six or 12 members, a football team usually has at least 50 players, and a corporation can have thousands of employees. Yet these words take singular verbs and pronouns, and that causes problems for some writers. Some advice: Almost no one has trouble using verbs correctly with collective nouns. Most of us say, “The team is on the field,” not “The team are on the field.” We recognize that team is singular, so we use the singular verb is. Similarly, we say, “The Chicago Bears are on the field,” not “The Chicago Bears is on the field.” We use the plural verb are with the plural noun Bears. The general rule: If you use singular verbs with a noun, you also need to use singular pronouns such as it and its to refer to the noun. If you use plural verbs, use plural pronouns such as they and their, as in these examples:

The jury announced its verdict.
The jurors announced their verdict.

Northern State University fired its coach despite having its first winning season in years.
The Northern State Blasters fired their coach despite having their first winning season in years.

A team of psychologists is expected to testify in his behalf.
Several psychologists are expected to testify in his behalf.

A group of students was arrested after the game.
Dozens of students were arrested after the game.

Occasionally you will run into sentences that sound more conversational if you use the plural version. Also, using the plural may allow you to avoid sexism. Each of the following sentences is grammatically correct. Depending on the facts and context, the second one in each pair may be a better choice:

The team refused to practice when it was told it would have to buy its own shoes this year.
The basketball players refused to practice when they were told they would have to buy their own shoes this year.

The jury told the judge it wanted to visit the scene.
Jurors told the judge they wanted to visit the scene.
Each student was told to submit his application by May 1.
Students were told to submit their applications by May 1.

Newspapers do not usually use the cumbersome “his or her” formulation.

Not: Each student must bring his or her camera.
But: Students must bring their cameras.

Some grammarians consider collective nouns plural if the members of the group are not working together. These grammarians may be correct about the grammar, but the end result often is a sentence that sounds odd. In those cases, it’s better to look for another grammatically correct way to write the sentence.

Correct but awkward: The team are not in agreement on how to split the money. Or The team disagree on how to split the money.
Better: Team members are not in agreement on how to split the payoff. Or Team members disagree on how to split the payoff.

Each is singular. You say, “Each is,” not “Each are.” So use singular verbs and pronouns with the word each: “Each of them has asked for his money back.” (If the sentence is discussing both men and women, you can use the plural form to avoid sexism: “All of them have asked for their money back.”)

Each of the men was charged with burglary.
Each was released after posting bond.

Don’t confuse these uses of each with its use in this sentence:

Not: The men each has requested public defenders.
But: The men each have requested public defenders.

In this sentence, men is the noun that serves as the subject of the verb. Because men is plural, the verb must also be plural (have).

Words between subjects and verbs usually make no difference in subject-verb agreement, except for a few special cases that we discuss shortly.

Not: Johnson, along with five Republicans, have objected.
But: Johnson, along with five Republicans, has objected.

Not: The jury of five men and seven women were polled.
But: The jury of five men and seven women was polled.

Not: The team of psychologists have examined the man.
But: The team of psychologists has examined the man.

Not: The discovery of three more victims have stunned police.
But: The discovery of three more victims has stunned police.

Not: Each of the students who won Stutzman Scholarships have done well in college.
But: Each of the students who won Stutzman Scholarships has done well in college.
Johnson, jury, discovery and each are singular, so the verbs must be singular: has objected, was polled, has examined, has stunned and has done.

Some exceptions to these guidelines are troublesome. Whether percentages and fractions are singular or plural depends on the words that follow them. If the word after of is plural, the verb is plural. If it's singular, the verb is singular. These sentences are correct:

Eight percent of the students have the flu.
Eight percent of the student body has the flu.
Eight percent is rather low for this time of year.

A quarter of the faculty favors the strike.
A quarter of the professors favor the strike.
A quarter is enough for now.

Number is singular when used with the, but plural with the article a.

A number of people have been killed by the storm.
The number of deaths has been difficult to determine.

Majority, plurality and minority can be singular or plural. When these words are used alone, they are singular:

The majority has decided not to announce its decision.
The left-wing minority plans to voice its opposition.

These words can be singular or plural when they are followed by a prepositional phrase, as in these examples:

A majority of the houses were destroyed by the storm.
A majority of the electorate was confused by the referendum.

Very rarely, you may run into this exception: When the word majority is the emphasis of the sentence, a singular verb is used.

A majority of two votes is needed.