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.