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.