

Nouns: Collective Nouns

Collective nouns are a type of noun that names a group (of people or animals—something alive, or *animate*) and treats the group as a single unit. Therefore, collective nouns, when they are subjects, usually use a singular verb:

The fraternity cleans up the park on Saturday.
A swarm of bees blocks the trail entrance.
The jury is still deliberating.

Besides using the singular verb, later references to the group named by the collective noun must use singular pronouns:

The fraternity cleans up the park on Saturday. It has been doing this for a year now.
A swarm of bees blocks the trail entrance. It has to be removed by professionals.
The jury is still deliberating. It has asked for a review of the testimony.

In the case of the *swarm of bees*, you might make the mistake of thinking the subject is *bees*, a plural. You might then use the plural verb *are* and the plural pronoun *they*. However, *bees* is part of the prepositional phrase, *of bees*, and the subject of a sentence is never found in a prepositional phrase. The subject is *swarm*. This construction—noun/subject followed by prepositional phrase—is common with collective nouns. The verb has to match the subject, *not* the prepositional phrase:

(Singular) collective noun	+ Prepositional phrase	+ Singular verb
<i>team</i>	<i>of salesmen</i>	<i>is meeting</i>
<i>majority</i>	<i>of drivers</i>	<i>uses turn signals</i>
<i>minority</i>	<i>of voters</i>	<i>watches the news</i>
<i>family</i>	<i>of six</i>	<i>conserves water</i>
<i>crew</i>	<i>of workers</i>	<i>fixes the road</i>

However, there are exceptions. You can use a collective noun with a plural verb (and plural pronouns) if you intend to emphasize that the group is not acting in a unified way. For example, you might choose to refer to a jury as a plural if the members have been unable or unwilling to act together:

The jury were dismissed; they could not reach a verdict.

Another exception is British English, where it is more common to treat collective nouns as plural. If you read something by a British author (J.K. Rowlings, Jane Austin, Agatha Christie, or Charles Dickens, anyone?), you might observe this.

Collective nouns are not the same as non-count nouns. It is not possible to make a non-count noun plural (you cannot say *furnitures*). You can make a collective noun plural. You can have several *teams*, *families*, *crews*, *juries*, *swarms*, or *fraternities*. You would then use plural verbs and plural pronouns to match the plural subjects:

Most fraternities have adopted a park to clean for their service projects.
A few families on my block send their kids to the Montessori school.
Several crews are working on the downed power lines; they expect to finish by tomorrow.

You can't use any particular logic to know which nouns are collective; they vary among cultures and languages. Many English collective nouns have origins in the attitudes, customs, and figurative language of Medieval Europe; many imaginative collective names for animals trace their origins to French and English hunting traditions of the 1400s.

Here is a *partial* list of collective nouns:

Collective nouns for people*

army, navy, air force
audience
band
board
bunch
cast, choir, chorus
class
committee
company, corporation
congregation
crowd
department
family
gang
group
jury
majority
minority
party
public
school
senate
society
staff
team

Collective nouns for animals*

brood (of hens)
cloud (of gnats, grasshoppers)
colony (of bats, ants, bees)
congress (of ravens, baboons)
clutch (of eggs)
drove (of donkeys, hares, cattle)
flight (of doves, dragonflies)
flock (of ducks, gulls, geese, goats)
gaggle (of geese)
herd (of cattle, antelope, deer)
hive (of bees)
knot (of frogs, toads)
litter (of kittens, puppies, coyotes)
murder (of crows)
nest (of mice, ants, snakes)
pack (of wolves, dogs, coyotes)
parliament (of owls)
pod (of dolphins, whales, walruses)
pride (of lions)
skein (of flying ducks)
swarm (of wasps, bees, locusts, eels)
team (of work horses, oxen)
tribe (of antelope)
troop (of apes, baboons)
yoke (of oxen)

*Collective references to *inanimate objects* (things rather than people or animals) tend to be *non-count nouns* rather than collective nouns: *furniture, milk, rice, ice, applause, homework, art, air, weather...*

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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