



Language for Lawyers

by Gertrude Block

Question: A colleague has just informed me that the word “any” is incorrect when it refers to more than a singular noun. Thus, it is ungrammatical to say “any clients” or “any problems.” Is he right?

Answer: No, your colleague is wrong. I am often informed of strange grammatical rules, but this is a new one for me. *Any* can modify either singular or plural nouns, and all of the following constructions are correct:

- Any guest is welcome ...
- Any guests invited are welcome ...
- Any damage or loss is covered ...
- Any damages or losses are covered ...

Your colleague’s misunderstanding may be caused by his reliance upon the etymology of the word *any*, which is derived from the Old English word *an* (“one”); later the suffix *-ig* was added to *an*, then reduced to *y*, giving us the current English word *any*. Because of this progression, *any* currently is without number of its own and instead takes the number of the word it modifies.

A similar change has occurred with the word *none*, which was also derived from Old English (Anglo-Saxon) centuries ago. Originally, the phrase, *ne an* merged to become a single negative and now can be either singular or plural, depending on the user’s intent:

- All guests are welcome. None is barred ...
- All are welcome. None are barred ...

Perhaps one caveat should be added: The construction, “The witness did not hurt our case any,” is still considered colloquial, not standard English. For standard English, substitute *at all* for *any* or simply say, “The witness did not hurt our case.”

The pairs *either/or* and *neither/nor* are similar to *none* in deciding their number. There’s no problem when both members of each pair are alike in number. For example, in the statement, “Neither the plaintiff nor the defendant *is* lying,” use the singular verb *is*. And if both members of each pair are plural, use the plural *are*. But there is a problem when the members of the pairs differ in number.

For example:

- Either the book or the excerpts of it *are* helpful.

- Either the excerpts of the book or the book itself *is* helpful.

The principle governing this choice of the following verb is called attraction. As you can see from the examples, choose the number of the noun closest to the verb. That principle supersedes both logic and grammar. It has evolved simply because that choice has seemed natural by native speakers of English.

Notice how idiom has overcome grammar in some other situations:

- Many a recent law school graduate *owes* large debts.
- All but one plaintiff *has* decided to end her suit.

As you have noticed, in both sentences, the subject is plural—*many* and *all*. Yet native speakers prefer a natural selection to a grammatical one, choosing singular (idiomatic) verbs—*owes* and *has*.

The question of verb number puzzles other readers. Here are two questions that readers sent on that subject:

- The first page and the editorials of a crusading newspaper are its one-two punch.
- The corporation and each of its subsidiaries are duly incorporated.

As native speakers, most of the people reading these examples are as competent as I to make this decision, so choose your own answer. But I can tell you what I’d do: I would evade the question by making both subjects (*page* and *editorials*) singular. So my revised first statement would be, “the first page and the editorial page ...”. The second statement would be revised as, “Both the corporation and each of its subsidiaries are duly incorporated.” (This device is more accurately called fudging, but it works.)

As you may have noticed, this problem occurs only in present-tense contexts. I have never seen statements like “There has been no occurrences in the past.” Or, “There was no excuses given for the defendant’s conduct.” ☹

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