

## Collective Nouns

Collective nouns are a type of noun that names a group (of people or animals—something alive, or *animate*).

### Collective nouns are a single unit

A group named by a collective noun is treated 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 is blocking the trail entrance. It has to be removed by professionals.*  
*The jury is still deliberating. It has asked for a review of the testimony.*

### Collective nouns in prepositional phrases

In the case of the *swarm of bees*, you might make the mistake of thinking the subject is *bees*. 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>

### Collective noun exceptions

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 can be plural

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.

### Collective noun examples for people and animals

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*. For more on non-count nouns, see the tip sheet [Nouns](#).

Here are some examples of collective nouns:

Collective nouns for people*	Collective nouns for animals*
army, navy, air force	brood (of hens)
audience	cloud (of gnats, grasshoppers)
band	colony (of bats, ants, bees)
board	congress (of ravens, baboons)
bunch	clutch (of eggs)
cast, choir, chorus	drove (of donkeys, hares, cattle)
class	flight (of doves, dragonflies)
committee	flock (of ducks, gulls, geese, goats)
company, corporation	gaggle (of geese)
congregation	herd (of cattle, antelope, deer)
crowd	hive (of bees)
department	knot (of frogs, toads)
family	litter (of kittens, puppies, coyotes)
gang	murder (of crows)
group	nest (of mice, ants, snakes)
jury	pack (of wolves, dogs, coyotes)
majority	parliament (of owls)
minority	pod (of dolphins, whales, walruses)
party	pride (of lions)
public	skein (of flying ducks)
school	swarm (of wasps, bees, locusts, eels)
senate	team (of work horses, oxen)
society	tribe (of antelope)
staff	troop (of apes, baboons)
team	yoke (of oxen)

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



This Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center Tip Sheet is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>