

Investigating fictional faceoffs

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
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Let's talk rivalries. Everyone has an opinion on Coke versus Pepsi. How about werewolves against vampires? Do bears beat Battlestar Galactica? Hufflepuff or Gryffindor? DC versus Marvel? There are so many good matchups to entertain.

In this case, we need to think about snakes versus pirates. Why in the world do we need to play out this battle?

First of all, I know my friend Byron is going to read this and he hates snakes, but his favorite baseball team is the Pittsburgh Pirates. Secondly, we can clear up a big grammar gaffe by thinking about pirates and snakes. It's time to talk about "there is" and "there are."

Increasingly I've heard people throwing around "there is" or "there's" when they ought to say "there are." Does this matter? Of course!

After all, singular subjects need singular verbs; likewise, plural subjects get plural verbs. This is called subject-verb agreement.

However, with a subject like "there," how do we know if the subject is singular or plural? Let's use an example: There is/are many ways to get to this afternoon's drum circle.

But, wait a second: "there" can't possibly be the subject, can it? No, it's not. In fact, the subject is "ways," although it's not clear when we're beginning the sentence.

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Think of it this way: there are = pirates. Pirates say "ARRRRR!" There is = snake. A snake says "HISSSS!" One snake is singular. Multiple pirates are plural.

Let's substitute "there" with "snake" and then "pirates" into our sentence: Snake is many ways to get to this afternoon's drum circle. Pirates are many ways to get to this afternoon's drum circle. Although they both sound ridiculous, "pirates" sounds better.

Here's another way to determine which verb to use: turn it into a question. Is/are there many ways to get to this afternoon's drum circle? In this case, you would rightly say, "Are there many ways to get to this afternoon's drum circle?"

A snake (which goes HISSSS!) is singular. Pirates (which go ARRRRR!) are plural. There is = singular. There are = plural. In a battle between one snake and a crew of pirates, I'd put my doubloons on the pirates; one snake couldn't possibly take a whole pirate posse down.

Pirates beat snakes. There's plenty of room for argument here.

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