How to choose the right verb when you are referring to something in singular and/or plural

This month’s tip addresses a question from several users of the Editorial Help Desk—how to choose the right verb when you are referring to something in singular and/or plural.

QUESTION

Which sentence would be considered correct?

• The instructor(s) was knowledgeable about the curriculum.

• The instructor(s) were knowledgeable about the curriculum.

ANSWER

In order to avoid having to decide whether to use the singular or plural form of the verb (i.e., was or were), choose a verb form that can serve as both singular and plural.

• The instructor(s) knew the curriculum well.

• The instructor(s) had a good command of the curriculum.

• The instructor(s) had extensive knowledge of the curriculum.

• The instructor(s) had knowledge of the curriculum.

Alternative:

• The instructors were knowledgeable about the curriculum.
  (Notice there are no parentheses around the last “s” in the word instructor(s).)

For more, see Gregg Reference Manual, para. 626, page 211.