

Correlative Conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions are the double-the-fun version of conjunctions because they always come in pairs. Since they are common in spoken and written language, you likely already know many of the duet pairings. Examples of correlative conjunctions include *either/or*, *neither/nor*, *not only/but also*, and *whether/or*. They exist in pairs because the usage of one often suggests that the other may be necessary. Correlative conjunctions may be used to link subjects/nouns, or they may be used to connect independent or dependent clauses.

Conjunctions

To understand correlative conjunctions, it is first helpful to understand conjunctions, which are words that introduce a connection between ideas. For more information, please see our Homegrown Handouts on [Coordinating Conjunctions](#) and [Subordinating Conjunctions](#).

Usage/Examples of Correlative Conjunctions

Now that you know what correlative conjunctions are, let us look at this duet version of conjunctions in actual sentences. Just like a duet, they complement each other and help the sentence they are operating within.

Example of using correlative conjunctions to connect the subject of a sentence

Either the dog **or** the cat went outside.

Example of using correlative conjunctions to connect two independent clauses

Not only does the city's fire department need a new station, **but it also** needs a new firetruck.

Example of using correlative conjunctions to connect clauses and nouns inside of clauses

There is something for everyone at Baskin Robbins **whether** you love mint chocolate chip **or** rocky road ice cream.

Explanation

Now that we have seen a few examples of correlative conjunctions in action, let's review why they work the way they do.

Either the dog **or** the cat went outside.

Explanation: In this sentence, “the dog” and “the cat” collectively form the subject of the sentence. The correlative conjunction pair, *either/or*, used in this sentence helps to establish a connection between the two co-equal subjects. The connection between the dog and the cat is one of contrast. One of them went outside, not both.

Not only does the city's fire department need a new station, **but** it **also** needs a new firetruck.

Explanation: This sentence is, admittedly, a bit of a tricky situation. The correlative conjunction pairing here is *not only/but also*. As noted above, this sentence combines two independent clauses. If you have read our other two handouts on conjunctions, you may be puzzled here. How does this sentence about the city's fire department combine two independent clauses, which could both stand on their own as a sentence?

The simplest answer is to briefly imagine this sentence without correlative conjunctions. How would you express the ideas? You would probably write something like the following example. *The city's fire department needs a new station. It also needs a new firetruck.*

Now, let us bring back in the correlative conjunction pairing: *not only/but also*. To fit these two into our ideas, we must change the wording. Namely, we must add the word “does” into the first part of the sentence. At that point, we have successfully implemented the correlative conjunctions.

Therefore, we are still using two independent clauses even if we have to accommodate our phrasing for the star-powered pairing of our correlative conjunctions. Anytime these diva headliners make the other parts of the sentence change for them, the correlative conjunctions do not change whether the parts of the sentence can stand on their own as independent clauses.

There is something for everyone at Baskin Robbins **whether** you love mint chocolate chip **or** rocky road ice cream.

Explanation: This sentence has one independent clause and one dependent clause. The first part of the sentence, “There is something for everyone at Baskin Robbins” is an independent clause. It can stand on its own as a complete sentence. The second part of the sentence, “whether you love mint chocolate chip or rocky road ice cream,” is a dependent clause because it cannot stand on its own as a sentence. If you wrote that portion by itself, the reader would wonder, “Well, so what if I love mint chocolate chip or rocky road ice cream?” Therefore, the two parts of the sentence go together, assisted by the incomparable duet of correlative conjunctions.

Note on Grammar

There is an important grammatical consideration to point out with correlative conjunctions. It has to do with subject-verb agreement. Let us look back at one of our sample sentences.

Either the dog **or** the cat runs outside.

In this case, the subject of our sentence is “the dog or the cat.” The word “or” indicates either of the two options. Since that is the case, the verb must agree with the part of the subject most directly near it, in this case, “the cat.” Therefore, the verb becomes singular, “runs,” to match the singular nature of the subject it represents, “the cat.” But, suppose we write a different sentence involving a dog and cats.

Either the dog **or** the cats run outside.

In this sentence, we still are using correlative conjunctions to create a collective subject. However, now we have “the dog,” singular, and “the cats,” plural. Since we are using the word “or,” we are still introducing the option between the two. The verb must agree with the part of the subject that it is closest to, in this case, “the cats.”

Note: If you use the word “and” to create a compound verb, you always use a plural verb. Thus, you would write something like this: “The dog and the cat run outside.” For more information, please see our handout: [Subject-Verb Agreement](#).

Activity

Combine the sentences with a pair of correlative conjunctions.

1. My brother does not want to go to the store. I do not want to go to the store.
2. My cousin might play in Saturday's game. My sister also might play in Saturday's game.
3. Nobody knows how to play the card game Canasta anymore. Nobody knows how to play the card game Cassino these days.
4. The kings serve as a mascot of not only a hockey team in Los Angeles but also a basketball team in Sacramento.
5. I would be happy to ride the Trans Siberian Railway. I would be happy to ride the Rocky Mountaineer.

Answer Key for Activity

Please note that there is no single correct answer for this activity.

1. Neither my brother nor I want to go to the store.
2. Either my cousin or my sister might play in Saturday's game.
3. Not only does nobody know how to play Canasta anymore, but they also do not know how to play Cassino.
4. The kings serve as a mascot of not only a hockey team in Los Angeles but also a basketball team in Sacramento.
5. I would be happy to ride either the Trans Siberian Railway or the Rocky Mountaineer.

References

Aarts, B. (2011). *Oxford modern English grammar*. Oxford University Press.