

Either, neither, both

Introduction



"We have **both** red and white wine - which would you like?"

"**Neither**, thanks. I'd prefer a beer if you have any."

Definition

Either, **neither** and **both** are quantifiers which we use to talk about two things or people.

Construction

There are lots of different structures. Here are some of them:

| | | |
|----------------|----------------------|--|
| Either | + singular noun | Either day is OK for me. |
| | without a noun | Either is OK for me. |
| | + two singular nouns | Either Monday <u>or</u> Wednesday is OK for me. |
| | + of + plural noun | Either of those days is OK for me. |
| Neither | + singular noun | Neither day is OK for me. |
| | without a noun | Neither is OK for me. |
| | + two singular nouns | Neither Monday <u>nor</u> Wednesday is OK for me. |
| | + of + plural noun | Neither of those days is OK for me. |

| | | |
|-------------|----------------------|--|
| Both | + plural noun | Both days are OK for me. |
| | without a noun | Both are OK for me. |
| | + two singular nouns | Both Monday <u>and</u> Wednesday are OK for me. |
| | + of + plural noun | Both of those days are OK for me. |
| | after a noun | Those days are both OK for me. |

Note that with 'of', we need to use 'the', a **demonstrative**, a **possessive adjective** or a **pronoun**.

Are **either** of the candidates suitable?

I've seen **both** of these films.

Neither of my children likes vegetables.

Neither of them likes vegetables

We can use **both** in this way without 'of' but it is necessary for **either** and **neither**:

Both (of) her parents are teachers. ✓

Neither of her parents are teachers. ✓

Are **either** of her parents teachers? ✗

Neither her parents are teachers. ✗

Uses

| Use | Examples |
|--|--|
| To talk about two possibilities or choices | We can have the meeting on either day - I don't mind. I can offer you either tea or coffee. Either we invite them here <u>or</u> we can meet in a restaurant. |
| To ask two people a question | Do either of you speak German? |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>To respond to or add information to a negative statement</p> | <p>"I don't like coffee." "Neither do I."/"I don't either." I'm not going to the meeting and neither is Kerry. I'm not going to the meeting and Kerry isn't either.</p> |
| <p>To emphasise a similarity between two things or people</p> | <p>They both like coffee. Neither of them likes coffee. I don't think either of them likes coffee.</p> |
| <p>To talk about possible consequences</p> | <p>Either we improve our performance <u>or</u> we'll lose even more clients.</p> |
| <p>To emphasise two related points</p> | <p>He didn't work hard enough. Neither was he ever on time.</p> |
| <p>To emphasise that not only one but two things or people are involved</p> <p>Note that we use an affirmative verb with 'neither...nor' and 'both...and' and a negative verb with 'either...or'</p> | <p>He confirmed neither the date <u>nor</u> the time of the meeting. = He didn't confirm either the date <u>or</u> the time of the meeting. He confirmed both the date <u>and</u> the time of the meeting.</p> |

Subject verb agreement

| | Singular | Plural |
|---------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| both | ✗ | Both are big enough. |
| either | Either is big enough. | [see below] |
| neither | Neither is big enough. | [see below] |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| 'either of' 'neither of' | Either of them is big enough. Neither of them is big enough. | Either of them are big enough. Neither of them are big enough. |
|-----------------------------|---|---|

Note that

1. With **either** and **neither** we can use a singular or plural verb. In conversation, both are acceptable:

"Have **either** of you seen my keys?"

but a singular verb is preferred in formal written English:

Neither of our sales targets has been reached.

2. When there is more than one noun, the choice of verb depends on whether the first or second person or thing mentioned is singular or plural:

| | |
|--|--|
| When the second noun is singular - singular verb preferred but plural verb acceptable in conversation. | Either the sales manager or the director is going to attend the conference. |
| When the second noun is plural - plural verb. | Either the director or the sales managers are going to attend the conference. |
| When the second noun is singular but the first is plural - a singular or plural verb. | Either the sales managers or the director <u>is/are</u> going to attend the conference. |

Not only nouns

As well as nouns, we can use **either**, **neither** or **both** to talk about other things, including adjectives and actions:

This car is available in **either** red or blue.

We can **either** drive or go by train.

She's **neither** helpful nor polite.

She can **both** sing and dance.

Correlative conjunctions

We use '**either...or...**'; '**neither...nor...**' and '**both...and...**' to include two people or things in a sentence or clause:

She has **either** a brother or a sister - I can't remember.

She has **neither** a brother nor a sister.

She has **both** a brother and a sister.

These structures can also be used with verbs:

I'll **either** reply to my emails this afternoon or do some research; I don't have time for **both**.

She **neither** smokes nor drinks.

She **both** smokes and drinks.

Examples



You can ask **either** Maria or George for help - they're **both** experts.



Either you work harder in future or you'll fail your exams.



"I'm not busy on Friday." "I'm not **either**, so let's meet then."



"I'm not happy with this situation. **Neither** am I prepared to put up with it any longer."

"Well, we can **either** send a strong letter or I can call them again. Which do you suggest?"



Do **either** of you remember taking this turning here?



Both my son and my daughter are driving me mad.



I think **either** Patty or Estelle is going to win.



I don't know why I took this job - the work is **neither** interesting nor challenging.



"Would you like tea or coffee?" "I don't mind - **either** is fine."

"Milk? Sugar?" "**Neither**, thanks."

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