

# 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:

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

|             |                      |  |
|-------------|----------------------|--|
| <b>Both</b> | + plural noun        | <b>Both</b> days are OK for me.                        |
|             | without a noun       | <b>Both</b> are OK for me.                             |
|             | + two singular nouns | <b>Both</b> Monday <u>and</u> Wednesday are OK for me. |
|             | + of + plural noun   | <b>Both</b> of those days are OK for me.               |
|             | after a noun         | Those days are <b>both</b> 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 <b>either</b> day - I don't mind.<br><br>I can offer you <b>either</b> tea or coffee.<br><br><b>Either</b> we invite them here <u>or</u> we can meet in a restaurant. |
| To ask two people a question               | Do <b>either</b> of you speak German?  |

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

## Subject verb agreement

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

|                             |   |   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| 'either of'<br>'neither of' | <b>Either</b> of them is big enough.<br><b>Neither</b> of them is big enough. | <b>Either</b> of them are big enough.<br><b>Neither</b> 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. | <b>Either</b> the sales manager or the director is going to attend the conference.             |
| When the second noun is plural - plural verb.  | <b>Either</b> 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.                  | <b>Either</b> 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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