

# 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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