

This New York Times article discusses literature, AA and the question of whether the word amends is singular or plural:

On Language - "Making an Amends"

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On Language

'MAKING AN AMENDS'

By Ben Zimmer

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Meg e-mails: "I am a member of a 12-Step program in which the Eighth and Ninth Steps refer to 'making amends.' When people share their experience with these Steps, they often talk about 'making an amends' as if it were a combination of singular and plural. I find this so annoying that I may need to make amends for interrupting people to correct their grammar. But perhaps I am in error. Could you please advise as to the correctness of 'making an amends'?"

The 12 Steps to recovery first outlined by the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, have been enshrined in A.A.'s "Big Book" for more than seven decades. Over the years, the remorseful focus on "making amends" in Steps 8 and 9 has extended beyond the A.A. movement to the language of recovery more generally, even making an appearance in the public statement by Tiger Woods earlier this year apologizing for his marital infidelities.

While Woods said in his prepared statement, "It's now up to me to make amends," he modified the idiom in an interview with ESPN the following month, speaking of the "many people I have to make an amends to." Woods is hardly alone in treating the word amends as a singular noun, or even alternating between singular and plural interpretations of the word.

Uncertainty over how to treat amends is far from new. The Oxford English Dictionary has examples of amends used in a distinctly singular fashion all the way back to the fifteenth century. The English essayist Joseph Addison wrote of making "an honorable amends," and T. S. Eliot, in his poem "Portrait of a Lady," posed the question, "How can I make a cowardly amends / For what she has said to me?"

Amends came into English from the Old French word amendes, meaning "fines" or "penalties," the plural of amende, meaning "reparation." But while the singular form persisted in French, it dropped out of English, leaving us with a plural noun that has no proper singular equivalent. Something similar happened with other words in the language, like alms, odds, pains and riches.

Noah Webster tried to sort out this confusion in his 1789 book, "Dissertations on the English Language." Webster held that "amends may properly be considered as in the singular number," but concluded that judgment of the word as singular or plural was ultimately "at the choice of the writer." He saw the word means as a parallel case: if means expresses a single action to achieve a result, it can be thought of as singular despite the -s ending, but if it encompasses more than one action, it can take the plural reading.

Sadly, idioms don't always accord with logical argumentation. The singular version of means survives in the frozen phrase, a means to an end, but singular amends has never made much headway in standard English. Make an amends is vastly outnumbered by make amends in written use, though it is likely more popular in everyday speech, as Tiger Woods demonstrated when he went off-script. Notwithstanding illustrious predecessors like Addison and Eliot, it's best to make amends and not an amends, lest your act of contrition turn into a grammatical squabble.