Subject/Verb Agreement

Subject/verb agreement means that subjects and verbs must agree in number (singular or plural). If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb must be plural. This handout covers the basics and some of the more complicated situations.

Note: In every example in this handout, the subject will be bold and the verb will be underlined.

The Basics
The rule is that a singular subject takes a singular verb, and a plural subject takes a plural verb. Sometimes, this is very simple:

Example: He runs. She runs. They run.

Remember that to make a regular noun plural, you add “s” (or “es”). To make a regular verb plural, you do the opposite. Regular singular verbs have an “s,” and regular plural verbs do not.

Example: The bird sings. The birds sing.

Irregular verbs might completely change form depending on whether they are singular or plural. Here are a few examples:

Example: He has ice cream. They have ice cream. Carol was funny. The comedians were funny.

Those are the basics. But that’s hardly all there is to subject/verb agreement.

Special Situations
Because there are so many ways to put a sentence together in English, you are bound to run into some situations with special rules to deal with them.

Separated Subjects and Verbs
Be careful when a phrase or clause separates the subject and verb. Sometimes it can be easy to mix up which noun the verb is supposed to agree with.

Incorrect: The cars sold at the dealership is affordable.
Revised: The cars sold at the dealership are affordable.

In this example, the subject of the verb is “cars,” which is plural. Although the singular noun “dealership” is right next to the verb, it is not the subject, so the verb doesn’t have to agree with it. The subject and verb are separated by a prepositional phrase.
Compound Subjects and False Compound Subjects
A compound subject just means that two or more nouns are joined by “and” as the subject phrase of the sentence. A normal compound subject takes a plural verb.

*Example: Jim and Charlie are classmates.*

A false compound is created when the writer uses “as well as,” “together with,” “along with,” or “in addition to.” These phrases have no effect on the number of a subject and so cannot serve to create compound subjects.

*Incorrect: My brother, along with my two sisters, have not decided on which car to buy.*

*Revised: My brother, along with my two sisters, has not decided on which car to buy.*

In this example, the verb “to have” needs to agree with the subject “brother.” Don’t get confused by “along with my two sisters”—they are not the subject of the sentence. On the other hand, the sentence could be rewritten to include them:

*Compound: My brother and my two sisters have not decided on which car to buy.*

*Compound: My two sisters and my brother have not decided on which car to buy.*

That is an actual compound subject, so the verb needs to be plural. Even though the second sentence places the singular “brother” next to the verb, the entire subject is still a compound subject, which takes a plural verb.

Either/Or and Neither/Nor
When the verb follows “or” or “nor,” the verb agrees with the part of the subject that it is closest to, the last subject in the pair or group. Obviously, then, if both subjects in the pair (or all subjects in the group) are singular, the verb is singular.

*Example: Either the doctor or the nurse fills out the chart.*

*Example: Neither my mother, nor my father, nor my sister knows where my brother went.*

If one subject is singular and the other is plural, the verb agrees with the last subject. Often, the best practice is to put the plural noun second to avoid an awkward construction.

*Awkward: Either the nurses or the doctor fills out the chart.*

*Revised: Either the doctor or the nurses fill out the chart.*

Both of the sentences above are technically correct, but the second sentence reads more smoothly.

Collective Nouns
A collective noun is a singular word used to define a group, such as jury, team, school, office, army, crowd, audience, organization, group, or family. Collective nouns take singular verbs when the members of the group function as a unit.
Example: The audience laughs at his jokes every time.

Collective nouns take plural verbs when the members of the group act independently of each other. However, because this can sound awkward, it is often better to revise the sentence so that the collective noun is not the subject.

Awkward: The shepherd’s flock have dispersed, scattering across the hillside.
Revised: The sheep in the shepherd’s flock have dispersed, scattering across the hillside.

In the first sentence, “flock” is a collective noun, but each sheep is acting independently, so “flock” takes a plural verb. In the revised version, the subject is now “sheep” (plural), so the plural verb sounds less awkward.

Indefinite Pronouns
Indefinite pronouns are nouns that do not refer to a particular person or thing. Because they don’t refer to a particular person or thing, rely on context or knowledge of standard usage to figure out whether the verb should be singular or plural.

Common singular indefinite pronouns include anybody, anyone, anything, each, everyone, everything, much, neither, none, no one, nothing, someone, and something.

Example: Something was not right.
Example: Neither actually wants to fight.
Example: “Everybody Talks” is a song by Neon Trees that everyone likes.

All of those examples take singular verbs. “Something” refers to one thing, and “everybody” and “everyone” refer to a lot of people as a single unit. “Neither” refers to two people, but there is a dropped part of the sentence that might help it make more sense. Read it this way:

Example: Neither one of them actually wants to fight.

If the sentence is written out that way, the actual subject is “one,” the loneliest number and a singular pronoun.

Common plural indefinite pronouns include both, few, many, and several. These take plural verbs.

Example: Both are coming for lunch.
Example: Although many would like to see earth from space, few actually have.

Some indefinite pronouns can be singular or plural, depending on whether they reference a singular word or plural word. Common plural or singular indefinite pronouns include all, any, more, most, and some.

Singular: All of the park is covered with ivy.
Plural: All of those berries are poisonous.
There Is/There Are
When a sentence begins with “there is” or “there are,” it has an inverted structure, meaning that the noun that the verb agrees with comes after the verb.

Singular: There is a strange noise in the walls.
Plural: There are strange noises in the walls.

Singular: There is a reporter who would like to speak to you.
Plural: There are reporters from several different news outlets who want to speak to you.

For the sake of clarity and concision, many do not like the “there is/there are” construction and prefer to avoid it. It is entirely possible to rewrite the above sentences to avoid the inverted structure that the construction creates.

Contact
Want to look through the subject/verb agreement in your writing? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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