



GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Subject -Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is an important structural element in academic or formal writing and directly impacts on a writer’s ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with her/his reader. It represents the match in person (first, second, third) and number (singular or plural) between a verb and its subject or between a pronoun and its antecedent (the word to which the pronoun refers), for example: “The student eats lunch in the cafeteria every day.” The subject of the sentence is the third person singular noun “**student**” and “**eats**” is the verb.

Another example would be: “When the instructor walks into the class, she expects the students to be ready to work.” In this sentence, the pronoun “**she**” is the subject, referring to the word “**instructor**” in the preceding dependent clause, and “**expects**” is the verb.

The subject of a sentence is the noun or pronoun that performs the action of the verb in an active voice sentence or receives the action of the verb in a passive voice sentence. The following sentence is an example of active voice: “My friend plays the part of Juliet.” The subject of the sentence is “**friend**” and the verb is “**plays**.” The same sentence in passive voice would be: “The part of Juliet is played by my friend.” Here the subject of the sentence is “**part**” and “**is played**” is the verb.

In Standard English, a verb changes form when its subject is third person singular (s/he/it) and only in the present tense, as illustrated below:

Present		Past	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
I walk	we walk	I walked	we walked
you walk	you walk	you walked	you walked
s/he walks	they walk	s/he walked	they walked
it walks	they walk	it walked	they walked

The rule for subject-verb agreement is that in the present tense, a verb with a third person singular subject must always end in “-s” (s/he/it **walks**) or “-es” (s/he/it **does**). A third person singular subject is any word or phrase that can be replaced with one of the pronouns “**he**,” “**she**,” or “**it**.” As you can see from the above, the past tense form is the same regardless of the subject.

The following paragraph illustrates the relationship between singular and plural subjects and their respective pronouns:

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Nancy Colon [**she: singular subject**] is going to lead a march on the White House. The rest of the group [**it: singular subject**] is going to be arranged in rows of three behind her. The organizers [**they: plural subject**] of the march expect those who arrive early to assemble in an orderly fashion. When the whole group has arrived, the marchers [**they: plural subject**] plan to raise their placards and begin chanting.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Most simple present verbs show agreement with an “-s” ending. However, the verb “**be**” is an exception, having three instead of two present tense forms (I **am**, you **are**, s/he/it **is**, we, you, they **are**).

In your own writing, make sure that subjects and verbs agree:

- **when words separate the subject and verb**

Words that come between a subject and its verb do not affect the number (singular or plural) of the subject. You must determine which word is the sentence's subject and then use it to decide whether the verb needs an “-s” or “-es” ending.

The **color** of the stage setting **seems** drab.

The **colors** of the stage setting **seem** drab.

A **computer** with a variety of memory chips **serves** a special purpose.

Computers with a variety of memory chips **serve** a special purpose.

Sometimes words that come between a subject and its verb may contain a clause with a subject and verb of its own. Most often this will be a **relative clause**, beginning with a relative pronoun (**who, whom, whose, which, that**) or, less often, a relative adverb (**when, where, or why**). This can be confusing because it's hard to tell which verb goes with which subject. Remember that a subject and verb need only agree when they are in the same clause.

A **woman** who has a career and a family **has** very little time for herself.

In the sentence above, the singular noun “**woman**” is the main subject, modified by the relative clause (“**who has a career and a family**”), and “**has**” is the main verb. Relative pronouns may be either singular or plural, depending on what noun or pronoun they modify. Therefore, the verb of a relative clause must agree with the relative pronoun, i.e., the relative pronoun “**who**” modifies “**woman**” and takes a singular verb “**has**.”

Be particularly careful with subject-verb agreement when the words that separate a singular subject from its verb sound like they are making the subject plural. These words include expressions such as “**in addition to,**” “**as well as,**” “**including,**” and “**together with.**” These expressions do not function like the conjunction “**and**”; in other words, they do not make the subject plural even though they sound like they do.

A **microcomputer**, as well as a mainframe, **uses** silicon chips.
A **microcomputer and a mainframe use** silicon chips.

The **processing unit**, together with all of its types of memory, **forms** the heart of the machine.

The **processing unit and the various types of memory form** the heart of the machine.

The **memory**, including the ROM and RAM, **performs** the computer's operations.
The **memory unit and the ROM and RAM perform** the computer's operations.

- **when the subject comes after the verb**

In some sentences, you may reverse the order of a subject and its verb in order to achieve an interesting effect. In other sentences, you may want to begin with the words “**There**” or “**Here**.” These sentence openers move the true subject to a position after its verb. When you are editing your verbs, make sure that you check these sentences very carefully to find the subject and to determine the correct form of the verb.

At the end of the list **is** the divorced **man**.
At the end of the list **are** divorced **men**.

There **is** one significant **reason** why men remarry.
There **are** many **reasons** why men remarry.

However, remember that when you write a sentence that begins with the word “**it**” you must always use the singular form of the main verb (which usually ends in “-s”).

It seems that women have the greatest difficulty remarrying.
It does not mean that men do not have any problems.
It appears that men have a greater tendency to avoid commitment than do women.

- **when two or more subjects are joined by “or” or “nor”**

When two or more subjects in a sentence are joined by “**or**” or “**nor**,” “**either . . . or**,” or “**neither . . . nor**,” the verb form is usually determined by the subject that is closest to the verb.

It is true that a career or **children affect** a woman's marriageability.
It is true that children or a **career affects** a woman's marriageability.

Neither that woman nor her **friends are** unfulfilled.
Neither those women nor this **one is** unfulfilled.

- **when the subject is a singular pronoun**

When used as a subject, the following pronouns are always considered singular and need verbs with -s endings on them in the present tense: **each**, **either**, **neither**, **every**, **everybody**, **everyone**,

everything, anybody, anyone, anything, somebody, someone, something, nobody, no one, nothing.

Everything contributes to the problem.

Someone who was abused as a child **is** likely to victimize his or her own children.

Nobody who deals with the problem **has** all of the answers.

In terms of subject-verb agreement, the most troublesome pronouns on the list above are **everybody, everyone, either, neither, every, and each**. **Everybody** and **everyone** sound like groups but grammatically they behave like singular subjects.

Everybody has to be concerned about family violence.

Everyone who deals with families **sees** these problems.

Either, neither, each, and every are always singular subjects unless they are used with “**or**” or “**nor**.”

Neither is going to explode soon.

Either his sister **or** his parents **are** going to explode soon.

Each family member **has** control over his/her aggression.

- **when words separate a singular pronoun subject from its verb**

When a singular pronoun, such as **either, neither, each, or every** is separated from its verb by other words, it is easy to get confused about the form of the verb. Remember that words that come between a subject and its verb do not affect the number of the subject or the form of the verb.

Either of the parents **is** going to explode soon.

Neither parent **is** in control.

Each of the family members **has** to control his or her aggression.

Each and **every** cause subject-verb agreement confusion when they are separated from their verbs by the phrase **of them** or by two nouns joined by **and**.

Each of them **seems** to be prone to violence.

Each of their parents **has** a repressed personality.

Every father and mother **has** to be careful.

The pronouns **some, none, any, and most** can be either singular or plural subjects depending upon the words that follow them. For example, **some** can mean "more than one," in which case the subject is plural, or it can mean "a part of one," in which case the subject is singular.

Some of the families studied **commit** emotional abuse.

Some of the problem **is** caused by television.

Most of the family members **remain** silent about it.

Most of the information **comes** from their neighbors.

- **when the subject is a collective noun**

A collective noun is the name of a group that usually functions like a single unit. Some examples include **family, class, audience, crowd, committee, team, jury, orchestra** and **group**. If you are referring to the group as a single unit, then the noun is a singular subject (and needs an “-s” ending on its verb). If you are referring to the individual members of the group, then the noun is a plural subject.

The **team** of scientists **monitors** the Milky Way.
The **team** of scientists **disagree** about those stars.

This **group** of stars **is** known as the Andromeda Galaxy.
That **group** of stars **have** separated to form new galaxies.

There are a few phrases that look just like collective nouns but function differently. They include, among others, the following: “**A number of . . .**”; “**A couple of . . .**”; “**A lot of . . .**” These phrases act like quantifiers, e.g.: some, many, a few, with the plural noun that follows the preposition acting as the main noun of the phrase and taking a plural verb.

A number of **teachers assign** too much homework.
A couple of **my friends work** full-time.
A lot of **people** believe in helping others.

There is one collective noun that does function like the others listed above: the word **number**. When it is used in the phrase **the number of**, it is always a singular subject, and when it is used in the phrase **a number of**, it is always a plural subject.

A number of galaxies **are** shaped like disks.
The number of disk-shaped galaxies **is** growing.

- **when the subject is a quantity**

Like collective nouns, words that state a quantity or an amount usually function like singular subjects. Words of quantity include amounts of time, money, height, length, width, space, and weight.

One hundred thousand light years **is** an extremely long time.
Three million dollars **is** the cost of the typical telescope.

Quantities can also function like plural subjects when they refer to a part of something, not the whole thing. Usually in this case, the quantity is followed by the word “**of**.”

Two-thirds of all galaxies **are** elliptical in shape.

- **when the subject looks plural but is singular in meaning**

There are many subjects that look plural (in other words, that end in “-s”) but are singular in meaning. These include the names of school subjects (**mathematics, linguistics, physics,**

economics, civics), the names of some diseases (**measles, mumps, AIDS, herpes**), and miscellaneous words like **politics** and **news**.

Physics is the study of vector and scalar quantities.

Herpes is now impossible to cure.

The **news** about spiral galaxies **seems** unbelievable.

Mumps makes one's cheeks hurt and causes swelling and fever.

- **when the subject is a title**

Even when a title is plural (like *The New York Times*), it functions like a singular subject, and it needs an “-s” ending on its verb.

The Hales Observatories **tracks** comets and meteors.

Principles of Astronomy **explains** the rotations of that galaxy.

One Hundred Thousand Galaxies **provides** fascinating explanations about the content of the universe.

- **when the subject is a verbal phrase**

Sometimes a verb form that ends in “-ing” or an infinitive (the word “to” plus the base form of the verb) is used as a noun. A phrase containing one of these forms may appear as the subject of a sentence. In these cases, the subject is always singular.

Learning how to do something well **takes** practice and determination.

To see is to believe.