

SUBJECT VERB AGREEMENT



Every sentence has a subject and a verb. The *subject* is who or what the sentence is about. A *verb* describes the action or state of being of the subject.

A *singular* subject requires a *singular* verb, and a *plural* subject requires a *plural* verb. This handout addresses present tense verbs only. Past and future tense will change the verb usage.

Nearly all “simple present” tense verbs have two forms: one that ends in *-s* and one that does not. The end of a verb has an *-s* or no *-s*, depending on whether its subject is *singular* or *plural*.

The Rule of One -s for Nouns and Verbs

Singular: Noun without *-s* = verb with *-s*
 (The *student studies* in the library.)

Plural: Noun with *-s* = verb without *-s*
 (The *students study* in the library.)

(Meyers 146)

Singular Subjects

A present-tense verb that describes the action of a subject that is a *singular noun* usually ends in *-s*. For example:

Jim studies at Valley College.

Noun Verb

She lives in Los Angeles.

Noun Verb

The dog barks when the children ride by on bicycles.

Noun Verb



Plural Subjects

A plural noun usually ends with an *-s*. In a sentence with a *plural noun* as a subject, the verb will usually not end in *-s*. Be careful not to confuse plural nouns and verbs.

Here is an example of plural nouns and their verb agreements:

Several students wait in the classroom for their teacher.
Noun Verb

Forty cows graze in the pasture.
Noun Verb

The professors teach many different subjects.
Noun Verb

There are also nouns that are also verbs, like the word “benefit”.

The benefits of walking are clear.
Noun

Walking benefits everyone.
Verb

Structure:

There is a form to structure these agreements as seen below:

FORM

I	work.
You	
We	
They	

She	works.
He	
It	

- *She, he, it*: add *s* to the verb.

I	teach.
You	
We	
They	

She	teaches.
He	
It	

- Verbs ending in *sh, ch, ss, o* or *x*, i.e. *teach, wash, watch, go*: add *es* to the verb after *she, he, it*.

- The verb agrees with the subject closest in two situations:

a. When the subjects are both singular and plural:

Neither snowy conditions nor the frigid temperature on the mountain keeps me away from the mountains. ['Temperature' is closer to the verb, so 'keeps' is in the plural form]

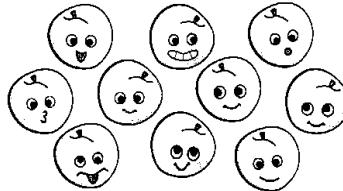
b. When the subject differs in person:

Either Priya or you were there. [*Were* agrees with you]

Either you or Priya was there. [*Was* agrees with Priya]

Collective Nouns:

Is the group singular or plural?



Groups are **singular** nouns even though they contain many subjects within. Some examples are: A family, team, audience, group, jury, crowd, band, class, and committee.

Note: Keep the verb singular if referring to the group as a **whole**. Change it to plural when referring to individual members of the group.

A. My basketball team was practicing at five o'clock. [singular]

V

B. My basketball team were all born before 1992. [plural]

V

In example A, the team is considered a group that was practicing at that time together. In example B, the individual members were *all* born before 1992, referring to their individual births.

Indefinite Pronouns:

Can pronouns be both singular and plural?

Below is an example of plural indefinite pronoun usage:

Many of the candidates argue during the debate.

▼

[“Many” is plural; therefore the plural form of the verb is ‘argue’.]

Other indefinite pronouns may be singular or plural, depending on the noun they refer to.

Singular or Plural Indefinite Pronouns

All	Enough	None	Some
Any	More	Most	

With these pronouns, focus on the subject of the prepositional phrase to give you a clue.

Example:

- A. All of the bicycles were stolen. [Bicycles is plural, so ‘all’ is considered plural]
- B. All of the pie was burnt. [Pie is singular, so ‘all’ is singular]

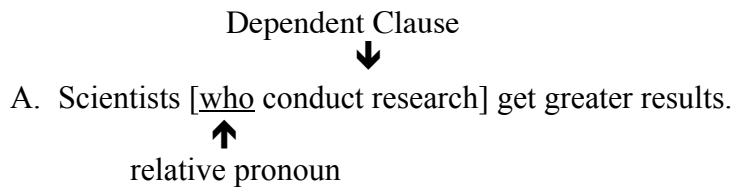
Subject-Verb Agreement:

Let us go beyond to dependent clauses!



So far, this handout discusses subject-verb agreement focused on simple sentences without dependent clauses. Now, it will focus on dependent clauses introduced by relative pronouns (*who*, *which*, or *that*). Often, but not always, these relative pronouns act as subjects of the clauses they introduce.

Some examples of relative pronoun usage:



The subject of the dependent clause, “who conduct research,” is the relative pronoun, *who*. Since *who* refers to the plural subject scientists, the verb **conduct** is also plural.

B. A scientist *who* **conducts** research **gets** greater results.

Now *who* refers to the singular subject scientist, so the verb **conducts** and **gets** are in singular form.

C. Trees that **shed** their leaves are called deciduous.

The dependent clause here is “that shed their leaves”. Since that refers to the plural word “trees,” the verb **shed** is in plural form.

Relative pronouns are not always the subject of the clauses they introduce.

The papers that he **received** this morning were in one envelope and caused him to smile.

That introduces the dependent clause, that he received this morning. The subject of this clause is he, so the verb **received** agrees with *he* and not *papers*.

Also, when the phrase “one of” precedes the relative pronoun, be careful when determining whether ‘one’ refers to a singular subject or a plural one.

A. Andy is one of the singers who qualify for the audition.

B. Andy is the only one of the singers who qualifies for the audition.

In the first sentence, all of the singers qualify, and Andy is one of them. Who refers to singers, so the verb “qualify” is plural.

In the second sentence, Andy is the only singer who “qualifies” for the audition. Who refers to one, so the verb “qualifies” takes the singular form.

Don’t let adverbs fool you; verbs should always agree with their subjects!

Example:

The family’s grocer is nearby.

[The subject is grocer; therefore, the verb “is” takes the singular form.]

Tricky subjects:

They look plural, but they are really singular in meaning!

Words such as *athletics*, *news*, *politics*, and *academics* end in “s”, but are treated as singular because they are considered **singular** groups.

Example:

Athletics is a major focus of mine.

V

The news blasts from a nearby television.

V

Exercise:

In the following sentences, write the correct form of the verb given.

1. In the winter, bears (hibernate)_____ for several weeks.
2. When she goes to school, she (learn)_____.
3. In Bali, the locals (practice)_____ their own variation of Hinduism.
4. In order to stay underwater for a long time, a scuba-diver (breathe) _____ oxygen from a tank.
5. When the weather is bad, students (play)_____ cards indoors.
6. A lemur usually (live)_____ most of its life in a tree.

Exercise:

In the following sentences, write the correct form of the verb given.

7. In the winter, bears (hibernate)_____ for several weeks.
8. When she goes to school, she (learn)_____.
9. In Bali, the locals (practice)_____ their own variation of Hinduism.
10. In order to stay underwater for a long time, a scuba-diver (breathe) _____ oxygen from a tank.
11. When the weather is bad, students (play)_____ cards indoors.
12. A lemur usually (live)_____ most of its life in a tree.

Read the paragraph below. Then, go back and circle the subject and underline its verb in the each sentence. If the verb is correct, mark a 'C' above it. Ignore Dependent clauses.

is

Technology ~~was~~ getting smaller and smaller in our world. Laptops provides comfort and efficiency in a business world. Tablets is more proof of this. The screens are getting smaller and smaller. Cell phones can also be useful to navigate the Internet. But it were not as easy in the past to complete the same functions on the go. Ten years ago, tablets did not exist. You could not write an essay on your phone. Although, people finds that desktop computers are not completely replaced.

You are now given compound subjects and base-form verbs. Use these to write a sentence in present tense, making sure your subjects and verbs agree.

Example: Subject: Toys and books verb: line

Toys and books line the walls in my nephew's room.

1. subject: Danny and his dog verb: hike

2. subject: each scooter and skateboards verb: provide

3. subject: neither this nor that verb: is

4. subject: Lasagna and spaghetti verb: is

In each sentence below, circle the subject, and underline the main verb. Indicate whether the subject is a collective noun or an indefinite pronoun. If it is wrong, correct it.

Example: The jury comes out of the room.

[The subject is a collective noun]

1. Some of the salt were on the floor.
 Subject is _____

2. My class came to see me recite my essay.
Subject is _____
3. Another one of the candidates make a nasty remark.
Subject is _____
4. My family were all present at the reunion.
Subject is _____
5. Each article is evidence that your argument is wrong.
Subject is _____

Underline the correct verb form in the following sentences. Afterwards, explain your answer.

Example:

Every pre-major and major write/writes an essay in this class.

[‘Every’ used with compound subjects refers to a singular noun, so ‘attempts’ is correct.]

1. Temperatures that is/are as hot as this make me sleepy.
2. When he call/calls, the telephone rings twice.
3. The crowd scream/screams for the band to encore.
4. The dresses that you like/likes are on sale today.
5. Professor Kats understands that one of the essays is/are difficult.
6. Great Expectations is/are a favorite piece of storytelling of mine.
7. Politics is/are interesting when you follow it, but confusing when you don’t.
8. Why do/does all of the pie seem burnt?
9. Is/Are tomatoes fruits or vegetables?
10. Many war veterans have/has traumatic memories.

This handout is based on the following texts:

Runciman, Lex. The St. Martin’s Workbook. 3rd. Edition. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995. 197-213

Fawcett, Susan, and Alan Sandberg. Evergreen: A Guide to Writing. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. 346-56.

Meyers, Alan. Writing with Confidence. 5th ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 144-78.

For further reference, see the following books:

Beason, Larry, and Mark Lester. A Common Sense Guide to Grammar and Usage. 2nd ed. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2000. 70-95.

Fawcett, Susan, and Alan Sandberg. Grassroots with Readings: The Writer’s Workbook. 6th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 96-119.

All of the above texts are available in the Writing Center.

Revised 6/25/13