



## *Subject / Verb Agreement (Part 1)*

A sentence consists of two main parts, a subject and a predicate. The subject is the something or someone that the sentence is about. The complete subject is a noun phrase, consisting of a noun or nouns (also called the simple subject) and all the descriptive material that goes with it. In the following sentence the subject is set off from the predicate with a / and the simple subject is bolded. All the descriptive material about the simple subject word is italicized.

Ex. *The red brick **house** on the corner / stayed* on the market for weeks.

Though the whole noun phrase is really the complete subject, we often speak of the simple subject as the subject of the sentence, which is the approach we will take for the rest of this handout.

Now let's look at the predicate of the example sentence (everything that comes after the /). The predicate is a verb phrase that consists of a verb and all the material that describes or qualifies it. Notice that the complete predicate makes an assertion about the subject.

Ex. The red brick house on the corner / ***stayed** on the market for weeks.*

If we take the subject (***house***) and the verb from the predicate (***stayed***) and put them together, we have the core of the sentence:

**house stayed**

**These two words (the subject and the verb) have to agree in number: if the subject is singular, the verb must also be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.**

If they don't agree, the reader will experience a momentary disjunction in meaning; he or she will have to stop for a moment and figure the sentence out and that is something we usually don't want our readers to have to do. We want the core of the sentence to be consistent.

Problems in agreement often result when writers aren't sure what the subject is or, in some cases, whether the subject is singular or plural. If you are not sure what the subject is, ask yourself, "Who or what is doing the action the verb expresses?" or "Who or what is being described by the predicate?"

Example: The **schedule** of course and classes often **bewilders** new students.

In this example, the schedule is what does the action of bewildering.



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Identifying the simple subject is the key to deciding whether to use a singular or a plural verb. Once you identify the subject, you can substitute a pronoun for it to help you check your subject/verb agreement. If there is only one subject and it's singular, substitute *it* for the subject to see if you've chosen the appropriate verb.

Example: The pet *raccoon* under the trees always *washes* his food.

*It washes*

If the subject is plural, substitute *they* to see if you've chosen the appropriate verb.

\*Note: Subjects can be plural in two ways: the simple subject itself can be a plural noun (cars, sisters, rooms) or the simple subject can be compound—two or more nouns joined by *and* (Tom and Jerry; cars, bikes, and boats; the school and home).

Example: The new *computers accomplish* an extraordinary number of complex tasks.

*They accomplish*

Example: *Jack and Jill* always *fall* down that stupid hill.

*They fall*

In the exercise that follows, test yourself to discover how well you are able to identify the appropriate verb for each sentence. If you score less than 100%, continue with the handout and the exercises.

### Exercise 1

In the following exercise, underline the appropriate verb.

1. The oranges in your orchard (is, are) large this year.
2. John, Sam, and Tom (eat, eats) with me every Sunday.
3. A brick house with many windows (is, are) what the family wants.
4. Mrs. Brown and her husband (wants, want) to move back to Houston.
5. Everyone in the high school band (marches, march) to the same beat.
6. One of the cats (has, have) six toes.
7. The group (agrees, agree) to take action.
8. The jury (has, have) gone separate ways.
9. Neither the instructors nor the student (has, have) a problem with the schedule.
10. John, as well as the Smiths, (believe, believes) the animal control laws apply to the situation.

Answers: 1. are, 2. eat, 3. is, 4. want, 5. marches, 6. has, 7. agrees, 8. have, 9. has, 10. believes

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## *Subject/Verb Agreement (Part 2)*

Subjects and verbs must agree in number for sentences to work as they're supposed to. If you don't recall the first part of the handout on subject/verb agreement or you haven't read it yet, go back and read it before you continue. What follows now are some tips for avoiding some of the subject/verb pitfalls that can trap the unwary writer.

1. **Avoid looking at words that come between the subject and the verb.** These intervening words can cause you to make agreement with the wrong noun. Remember, to identify the real subject of the sentence ask yourself who or what does the action—in the following example who or what plays?

Example: Communication among family members (play, plays) a key role.

Communication [among family members] plays a key role.

2. **Don't let a dummy subject fool you.** Identify the real subject of the sentence. Sentences that begin with *there* and *it* often delay showing the real subject until the end of the sentence. *There* and *it* are merely placeholders—they temporarily take the place of the real subject.

Example: There (were, was) only fifteen children in the classroom.

Fifteen children were in the classroom.

Even if the subject is located at the end of the sentence, it must agree with the verb. To determine the appropriate verb, put the subject at the beginning of the sentence.

3. **Solve the or, nor dilemma.** Subjects joined by *or* or *nor* take a singular verb unless the noun closest to the verb is plural.

Example: Either the ribbon or the bow (need, needs) to be replaced.

Either the ribbon or the bow needs to be replaced.

Example: Either the ribbon or the bows (need, needs) to be replaced.

Either the ribbon or the bows need to be replaced.

4. **Decide whether collective nouns are singular or plural.** Collective nouns like *jury*, *gang*, *committee*, *class*, and *congregation* are singular when the group is referred to as a unit; collective nouns are plural when the individuals act separately or when the individuals of the group are referred to separately.

Example: The faculty (is, are) hired in August for the next semester.



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The faculty is hired in August.

In the previous example the faculty as a unit is hired in August.

Example: The faculty (presents, present) papers at different conferences.

The faculty present papers at different conferences.

In this example the faculty (acting as individuals) presents papers.

5. **Know that everyone is singular.** Pronouns like *each*, *everyone*, *everybody*, and *anyone* mean every single one and take singular verbs.

Ex: Everyone (works, work) hard on this project.

Everyone works hard on this project.

6. **Look at the context.** Pronouns like *none*, *enough*, *more*, *most*, *some*, *all*, or *half* can make agreement with either singular verbs or plural verbs, depending on the overall meaning of the sentence.

Ex: Enough of the stew (was, were) spilled to make a stain.

Enough of the stew was spilled to make a stain.

Ex: Enough of the people (was, were) present to vote.

Enough of the people were present to vote.

7. **Beware of false plurals.** Some nouns (including most of the nouns that end in *ics*—like *statistics*, *mathematics*, *economics*—and words like *measles*, *news*, etc.) may end in "s" and look plural, but they are actually singular. Check the dictionary if you are uncertain of a word's number.

Ex: The news (is, are) really bad.

The news is really bad.

8. **Decide whom who refers to.** The relative pronouns *who*, *which*, and *that* refer to another noun or pronoun in the sentence. The verb agrees with this other noun or pronoun.

Example: It is good service that (makes, make) a restaurant great.

It is good service that makes a restaurant great.



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### Practice Exercises

Correct each of the following sentences by identifying its simple subject and determining whether the subject is singular or plural (you may need to refer the rules discussed above). To check whether you have made the correct verb choice, substitute *it* for singular subjects or *they* for plural subjects to check whether the core of the sentence agrees in number.

1. The daredevil among the teenagers (scares, scare) most parents.
2. The dragon or the king (wins, win) the battle.
3. The many guidelines for the paper (causes, cause) confusion among students.
4. One of the files (is, are) missing.
5. The main concern of swimmers who like to snorkel and scuba dive in the islands (is, are) predatory fish.
6. None of the protestors (was, were) arrested.
7. The profit from owning your own car dealership and credit bureau (makes, make) you think twice before investing.
8. Jewelers and retailers (sells, sell) the rings in January.
9. The measles (cause, causes) high fevers in young children.
10. There (has, have) always been a reason for doing it this way.
11. Enthusiasm and hard work (results, result) in success.
12. Either the wind or the waves (makes, make) that sound.
13. The islands in the Caribbean (is, are) very busy during the height of the tourist season.
14. The restaurants and the band (donates, donate) their services for the event.
15. The preacher, in spite of his problems, (inspires, inspire) the congregation.
16. There (is, are) many exhibits on display at the museum.
17. The winds blew so strongly that parts of the home (was, were) blown away.
18. Eleven boats in the marina (was, were) missing.
19. Neither my garden nor my flowers (grows, grow) in December.
20. Animals who live in that zoo (disappears, disappear) often.
21. The walls and the window (needs, need) washing.
22. Anyone traveling to Ireland (has, have) a long trip ahead.
23. Each manager in the district (opens, open) the store at different hours.
24. A copy of the documents (was, were) found in the desk.
25. Enough of the evidence (was, were) shown to prove malice.

**Answers:** 1. scares; 2. wins; 3. cause; 4. is; 5. is; 6. were; 7. makes; 8. sell; 9. causes; 10. has; 11. result; 12. make; 13. are; 14. donate; 15. inspires; 16. are; 17. were; 18. were; 19. grow; 20. disappear; 21. need; 22. has; 23. opens; 24. was; 25. was

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