

Making Sure Subjects and Verbs Agree

The subject of a sentence is the person or thing doing the action, and the verb is the action, as discussed in Lesson 2. The subject and the verb have matching forms to show a relationship between them. If the subject is singular, the verb has to be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb has to be plural. This is called agreement in number.

Example

Singular Plural

One dog sleeps. Two dogs sleep.

The subject and verb would not be in agreement if the sentence were, “One dog sleep,” or “Two dogs sleeps.”

Singular verbs often end in “-s,” such as: he *lifts*, she *carries*, it *hurts*. Plural verbs usually do not end in “-s,” such as: they *lift*, they *carry*, they *hurt*. The exceptions are verbs used with “I” and the singular “you,” such as: I *lift*, you *lift*, I *carry*, you *carry*, I *hurt*, you *hurt*.

Exercise 1

Select the correct verb for each of the following sentences.

1. Claire is such a good cook that she rarely (**a.** follow **b.** follows) recipes.
2. They eat so much turkey that it (**a.** feel **b.** feels) as if they are going to burst.
3. On the bus, Phuong always (**a.** sit **b.** sits) toward the back.
4. The locksmith took out her keys and said, “This lock (**a.** opens **b.** open) easily.”
5. I (**a.** has **b.** have) never been to the top of the Empire State Building.
6. Toby and Kurt (**a.** leaves **b.** leave) for Central America today.
7. We (**a.** applies **b.** apply) for the new grant money today.
8. Sheila (**a.** paints **b.** paint) my nails every other Saturday.
9. Tyler and Casey (**a.** shares **b.** share) the NYPD baseball hat.

10. The oak trees always (a. looks b. look) beautiful in the twilight.

Past Tense

Almost all past tense verbs have the same form in the singular and plural.

SINGULAR	PLURAL
I looked	They looked
Diane spoke	Dean and Jeff spoke
The cat was	The cats were*
It was	They were*

*One exception is the verb *to be* which changes form in the present tense and past tense in both the first and third person.

PRESENT TENSE	PAST TENSE
OF <i>TO BE</i>	OF <i>TO BE</i>

first person:			
I am	we are	I was	we were
second person:			
you are	you are	you were	you were
third person:			
he, she,	they are	he, she,	they
it is		it was	were

Common errors with *to be* include *you was*, *we was*, and *they was*. While there are some clear-cut examples of agreement in number, there are often exceptions to the rule that can present difficulties in agreement. The sections

that follow give you some of the common problems that writers often have with agreement.

Contractions

Not all contractions present a problem, but two pairs of them consistently cause problems.

SINGULAR	PLURAL
Doesn't	Don't
Wasn't	Weren't

Example

She *doesn't* want to drive by herself, but they *don't* want to go at all.

Example

Bill *wasn't* on the roller coaster when it stopped. Campbell and Ken *weren't* even in line yet.

Exercise 2

Select the correct form of the verb in each of the following sentences.

11. (a. Doesn't b. Don't) the owner of the car with the flat tire live near here?
12. (a. Who's b. Who are) the students in the decorating committee?
13. The photograph (a. doesn't b. don't) look anything like her.
14. The beach (a. wasn't b. weren't) crowded today.
15. Phil and Leda (a. wasn't b. weren't) late for the movie.

When revising your writing, read the whole phrase instead of the contractions. This will help you to locate errors in agreement. Contractions are considered informal, anyway, so if you can avoid using them, you will eliminate a source of error in both punctuation and agreement.

Phrases Following the Subject

Sometimes the subject and verb in a sentence are split up by a phrase. The subject does not change in number when a phrase follows it.

Example

Dennis, in his overalls, looks like a farmer.

Phrases can be misleading, especially if they contain a plural word, such as “overalls.” The verb always agrees with its subject, not with modifiers.

Remove the phrase *in his overalls* and the agreement between subject and verb is much easier to see and hear: Dennis looks like a farmer.

Example

Mayra and Gabriel, posing in their costumes for the play, really look like Romeo and Juliet.

Phrases that separate the subject and verb are not always set off by commas.

Example

We know that one of the police officers at the scene was injured.

The subject of the sentence is *one*, so the verb must be the singular *was*.

Exercise 3

Select the correct verb for each of the following sentences.

16. If you (**a. was** **b. were**) in class, why didn’t you say “present?”

17. We could hardly believe that the color of his stereo speakers (**a. was** **b. were**) silver.

18. The decision of the referee, after checking the rule book, (**a. stands** **b. stand**).

19. The state income tax, combined with real estate taxes and lottery monies, (**a. pays** **b. pay**) most of the cost of our public schools.

20. We, the members of the Step Dancing Team, including outgoing president Jennifer Perez, (**a. wishes** **b. wish**) you continued success.

To check for agreement when revising, isolate the subject and verb and read them together without all the phrases.

Special Singular Subjects

Some nouns are singular even though they end in *s*. We think of them as a single thing even though they take the plural form.

measles	news	sports
mumps	physics	athletics
civics	politics	acoustics
mathematics	statistics	gymnastics
tactics		

Example

Politics is a dirty business.

Example

Physics is one of the more difficult classes.

Most of the nouns on the list above are singular only, although some can be singular or plural depending on their use in the sentence.

Example of singular use

Gymnastics is an excellent way to stay limber.

Example of plural use

Rhythmic and toddler gymnastics are the most popular programs at the gym.

Some nouns that do not end in *s* but name a group of people or things also can take a singular verb, like *jury*, *band*, *family*, *committee*, *club*, *team*, *herd*, and *crowd*. These are called *collective nouns*.

They are considered singular when the group acts together as a single unit.

Example

The jury *is* ready to hear testimony.

Example

The club typically *travels* by bus.

An amount of money or time also takes a singular verb as long as the amount is a single measure.

Examples

Seven dollars *is* the cost of admission.

Three hours *was* the time of the race from start to finish. Three-fifths of my work shift *is* spent cleaning up. When revising your writing, examine the subject of each sentence to determine if it requires a singular verb. Usually, the strategy of reading your draft aloud will help you hear if a subject and verb do not agree.

Exercise 4

Select the correct verb for each sentence.

- 21.** The team (**a. make** **b. makes**) money by selling magazine subscriptions.
- 22.** Half of the television programs (**a. show** **b. shows**) acts of violence.
- 23.** The knives (**a. is** **b. are**) in the drawer.
- 24.** The committee (**a. votes** **b. vote**) to change the by-laws.
- 25.** The scalper said, “Thirty seven dollars (**a. buys** **b. buy**) you a front row seat.”

Singular and Plural Pronouns

Pronouns, like regular nouns, can be singular or plural and must agree with the verb. Pronouns that do not refer to specific people or things, also known as *indefinite pronouns*, present the greatest difficulty for subject/verb agreement.

SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

each	anyone	either
one	anybody	neither
no one	someone	everyone
nobody	somebody	everybody

Example

No one in the movie *screams* louder than Theresa. Pronouns and their verb can also be separated by phrases. It can be even more confusing if the phrase contains a plural noun.

Example

Either of the coffee makers *brews* good coffee.

PLURAL INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

both	many
few	several

Example

Both of the wrestlers *want* to win the match.

Some pronouns can take either the singular or plural form depending on how they are used.

SINGULAR/PLURAL PRONOUNS

all

none

any

some

most

These pronouns are considered singular when they refer to a quantity and plural when they refer to a number of individual items.

Example of quantity

All of the cake was eaten.

All refers to the quantity of the whole cake that was eaten, so the singular verb *was* is used.

Example of number

All of the magazines were scattered across the floor.

All refers to the number of individual magazines, so the plural verb *were* is used.

Exercise 5

Select the correct verb form for each of the following sentences.

26. Some of the paint (**a.** is **b.** are) dry.
27. One of the new employees (**a.** plays **b.** play) guitar.
28. Someone from the two classes (**a.** needs **b.** need) to volunteer.
29. Several of the motorcycles (**a.** are **b.** is) in need of repairs.
30. All of our profits (**a.** goes **b.** go) to charity.

Compound Subjects

When more than one noun or pronoun is doing the action represented by one verb in a sentence, those nouns or pronouns are called compound subjects. If the two nouns or pronouns are joined by *and*, they agree with a plural verb.

Examples

Josh and Susan eat tamales.

He and she spend Saturdays with friends.

If two singular nouns are joined by *or* or *nor*, they require a singular verb.

Examples

Josh or Susan eats tamales.

Neither he nor she spends Saturdays with friends. When revising, it helps to think of compound subjects joined by *or* or *nor* as separate sentences.

Example

Josh eats tamales. Susan eats tamales.

Singular and plural subjects joined by *or* or *nor* require a verb that agrees with the subject closest to the verb.

Examples

Neither the players nor the coach likes to play in the rain.

Neither the coach nor the players like to play in the rain.

Questions

Usually in a sentence, the subject comes before the verb. With questions, however, the verb usually comes first. This can make agreement between the subject and verb hard to figure out.

Example

What are the differences between Greek and Italian food?

The subject of that sentence is *differences*, which is plural; therefore the verb must be plural.

Example

When does Henry get back from his trip?

The subject of that sentence is *Henry*, which is singular, so the verb *does* must be singular.

If you find it too confusing to decide which form of the verb is correct in your draft, try turning the question into a statement on a separate piece of paper. Statements are often an easier form to check for agreement.

EXAMPLE IN QUESTION FORM	EXAMPLE IN STATEMENT FORM
(Is, Are) some of the players injured?	Some of the players are injured.
(Does, Do) each of the bedrooms have a T.V?	Each of the bedrooms does have a T.V.
(Has, Have) several books been lost?	Several books have been lost.

Inverted Sentences

Inverted sentences contain subjects that follow the verb, just like questions. As usual, locate the subject of the sentence and make sure the verb agrees.

Example

Here are the keys to the car.

The subject is *keys*, which is plural, so the plural *are* is used.

Here is the key to the car.

The subject *key* is singular, so the singular *is* is used.

Examples

There goes the train.

There go the trains.

Examples

Suddenly, out of the woods comes the grizzly bear.

Suddenly, out of the woods come the grizzly bears.

Examples

Along with the questionnaire goes our brochure.

Along with the questionnaire go two brochures.

Exercise 6

Select the correct verb for each of the following sentences.

31. Beside the couch (**a.** stands **b.** stand) an end table.

32. When (**a.** does **b.** do) we have a lunch break?

33. Neither the doctor nor the patients (**a.** prefers **b.** prefer) the new lounge area.

34. Jamie and Deeptha (**a.** wants **b.** want) to go skiing.

35. Here (**a.** is **b.** are) the hot dogs you ordered.

