

# Subject-verb agreement

When people agree about something — a movie to see, what to have for dinner, what constitutes a good book, who to elect for president — they are in sync, on some level anyway. On the other hand, when people do not agree, they become aware of being at odds with others. In a sentence, the subjects of the sentence must agree with the verb in the sentence in both number (singular with singular; plural with plural, etc.) and in person (gender). Without this agreement, the reader gets conflicting messages, and stumbles over the text rather than getting your message. This lesson covers the basic and the not so basic rules for creating sound subject- verb agreement.

## Agreement with Singular and Plural Subjects...

Most of the time, the correct subject/verb combination is easy for writers to figure out; a singular subject takes a singular verb form, and a plural subject takes a plural verb form, as in

Kate dances well. (not "Kate dance well") **or** I hate okra. (not "I hates okra")

## Agreement When Words Come Between Subject and Verb...

Watch out for modifying phrases that come between subject and verb, and especially be on the lookout for prepositional phrases, as the object of a preposition can easily be confused with the subject of the sentence. Consider the following sentences:

The mountain bike with the red frame and the fat tires is the one I want.

"Mountain bike" is the subject of the sentence, not "the red frame and the fat tires." These items are part of the prepositional phrase that begins with "with." The phrase is there to tell us more about the mountain bike; it does not make the subject plural.

Another source of trouble is a modifying phrase beginning with *together with*, *along with*, *in addition to*, or *as well as*:

The new oak tree, along with three bags of planting mix and a box of fertilizer, was delivered to my house this morning.

Because the phrase is non-restrictive (or not necessary to the sentence), it is not part of the subject, and so should not be considered when deciding on the appropriate verb form for the sentence.

## **Agreement when subjects are joined by *and*, *or*, *neither/nor*, or *either/or***

In most situations, subjects connected by "and" are going to be plural:

David and Jesus are always late.

Coffee and dessert were served in the living room.

However, if the subjects joined by *and* refer to a single person, item, or action, the subject is singular:

Spaghetti and meatballs is the only thing Mary ever orders when we go out to eat.

Rubbing your stomach and patting your head at the same time is almost impossible to do.

My best friend and confidante is always there for me when I need her.

Subjects joined by *or* or by *either/or* or *neither/nor* may take singular or plural verbs depending on the form of the subject. If both subjects are plural, the verb will be plural; if both subjects are singular, the verb will be singular. If one subject is singular and the other is plural, the verb agrees with subject it is closest to, even if sometimes this structure feels counter-intuitive.

An apple or a banana is a good after-school snack.

Neither the teacher nor the students know how to solve this math problem.

## **Agreement With Indefinite Pronouns**

Indefinite pronouns cause a lot of confusion. Some indefinite pronouns, such as *all*, *any*, *none*, *most*, and *some*, are confusing because they can be singular or plural depending on the nouns to which they refer;

*Some of us* are going skiing this weekend.

*Some of the cake* is still on the table.

In the first example, *some* refers to individual persons, and so the verb is plural; in the second example *some* refers to an uncountable noun, *cake*, and therefore, the verb is singular. To determine the number for a verb used with these indefinite pronouns, check to see if the noun is countable (made of up of individual elements that can be counted), or uncountable (not countable by individual elements).

Some indefinite pronouns are always singular: for example, *anyone, anybody, anything, each, everyone, everybody, everything, nobody, nothing, somebody, someone, and something*.

*Each* of the new interns is assigned to work a twenty-four hour shift this week.

*Something* is happening, but you don't know what it is.

*Everything* is going wrong today.

Some indefinite pronouns are always plural, for example, *both, few, several, and many*.

*Some* sit around and wait for happiness; *many* go out and find it.

Darleen and Claire joined the volleyball team this semester, and *both* are going to be starting players.

## Agreement With Collective Nouns as Subjects

Usually, collective nouns will take a singular verb unless the writer wants to emphasize the individuals in a group:

*The group* stands firm on this issue.

At a Rolling Stones concert *the crowd* always sings along to "Satisfaction."

*The crew* hope their grog won't run out before they reach port.

Generally, it is better to name a plural subject rather than use a collective noun as a plural. Collective nouns used with a plural form of a verb tend to sound a bit awkward, as in the example above; "the crew members hope..." sounds a bit better.

## Agreement with *which*, *who*, and *that* as subjects

When the relative pronouns *which*, *who*, and *that* are used in a relative clause, the verb in the clause should agree in number with the subject of the sentence (the antecedent for the pronoun).

*Trees that drop fruit attract* bugs, birds, squirrels and other small animals.

The antecedent for the pronoun *that* is trees, so the verb in the adjective clause "that drop fruit" should be plural.

Dr. No is just one of the villains who have come up against James Bond.

This one is a little tough. The antecedent for the pronoun "who" in the adjective phrase "who have come against James Bond," is "villains" (not Dr. No), and so the verb in the phrase should be plural.

Oddjob is the only one of the villains who throws a razor-edged hat as a weapon.

In this sentence, however, the antecedent is "one" (the phrase modifies "one" rather than "villains"), and so the verb is singular.

## Agreement when subject-verb order is reversed

Most of the time the subject comes before the verb, but occasionally, word order is reversed and the subject is delayed. When word order is inverted, it is easy to confuse a noun in an opening phrase with the true subject of the sentence. One signal for a delayed subject is the expletive "there" at the beginning of a sentence:

When your parents get home, there is going to be trouble over *the broken vase*.  
If Jenny and Mark won't listen, there is little *I* can do to help them.

Word order is also inverted in questions. Often the subject appears between parts of a verb phrase, as in "Has she arrived yet?" The subject must match the first auxiliary verb (first verb form) in number.

How many rides have *you* been on at Disneyland today?

Are there going to be *many* people at the party tonight?

## Agreement When the Words are a Title

When a title of a book, film, building, institution, or work of art is the subject of a sentence, it should be treated as a singular subject, even when there is a plural subject in the title:

The Twin Towers was an important New York City landmark.

*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* was nominated for 7 awards.

In addition, when a phrase is referred to in terms of the language itself, the phrase should be treated as singular subject:

"Slowly I turned" is the key phrase in a famous vaudeville routine popularized by comedians Abbot and Costello.

## Agreement When the Verb is a Linking Verb

When linking two nouns with a linking verb, the number of the verb should correspond to the number of the subject.

Her dogs are her protection. Her protection is her dogs.



## Practice

To practice this skill, take a look at the following paragraphs. Each time you see a subject-verb agreement problem, underline the verb that does not agree with its subject (and circle the subject that the verb should identify with).

### 1. "Slowly I Turned" from Wikipedia

The routine have two performers pretending to meet for the first time, with one of them becoming highly agitated over the utterance of particular words. Names and cities (such as Niagara Falls) has been used as the trigger, which then send the unbalanced person into a state of mania; the implication is that the words have an unpleasant association in the character's past. While the other performer merely act bewildered, the crazed actor relives the incident, uttering the words, "Slowly I turned...step by step...inch by inch...", as he approaches the stunned onlooker. Reacting as if this stranger is the object of his rage, the angry actor begin hitting or strangling him, until the screams of the victim shake him out of his delusion. The actor then apologizes, admitting his irrational reaction to the mention of those certain words. This follow with the victim innocently repeating the words, sparking the insane reaction all over again. This pattern is repeated in various forms, sometimes with the entrance of a third actor, uninformed as to the situation. This third person predictably ends up mentioning the words and setting off the manic performer, but with the twist that the second actor, not this new third person, are still the recipient of the violence.

### 2. "Scatterbrain" from Wikipedia

Scatterbrain was an eclectic thrash metal band formed in 1989 when Long Island Hardcore group Ludichrist featuring Tommy Christ and Glen Cummings, changed the band's name. The group released two full-length albums: Here Comes Trouble (1990) and Scamboogey (1991). Scatterbrain are best known for their songs/videos "Don't

Call Me Dude" and "Down With the Ship," which integrate absurd humor into the band's eccentric thrash style. In 1993 Cummings left the group, moved to Nashville, TN and recorded with a band named Stone Deep. He also played guitar on two international Mucky Pup tours, but was never a member of the group. The remaining members Christ, Neider, Brogna and Boyko wrote and released a 7 song album titled: Mundus Intellectualis (1994) and then disbanded.