

Subject / Verb Agreement Rules

After identifying the subject and verb in a sentence, make certain the two agree. The following rules apply to subject/verb agreement.

1. If the subject is *singular* (refers to one person or thing), the verb will have an *-s* ending.

Examples: The **boy walks** home.
He throws the ball.
The **cat plays**.

2. If the subject is *plural* (refers to more than one person or thing), the verb will not end in *s*.

Examples: The **girls write** long essays.
The **computers work** well.
The **children practice** soccer after school.

3. The pronouns *each, either, neither, one, everyone, no one, nobody, anyone, anybody, someone, everybody*, and *much* are singular and will require a verb with an *-s* ending.

Examples: **Everyone** in the class **is** going on the trip.
Neither teacher **plans** to cover the entire textbook.
Someone living on our street **is** building a new deck.

4. The pronouns *several, few, both, many*, and *others* are *plural* and require a verb without an *-s* ending.

Examples: **Several** of my friends **work** in the library.
Many on the honor roll **study** long hours.

5. The pronouns *some, any, none, all*, and *most* may be either singular or plural.

Examples: **Some** of the cake **was** eaten.
All of the contestants **were** present.

6. When a sentence has two or more subjects joined by *and*, a verb without an *s* is needed.

Examples: **Students and teachers park** in front of the auditorium.
Pizza, cake and ice cream have always been his favorite foods.

7. When a sentence has two or more subjects joined by *or* or *nor*, choose a verb that agrees with the subject closest to it.

Examples: Fudge or **cookies are** a good choice for dessert.
Neither Tammy nor her **sister likes** to travel.

8. Collective nouns such as *team, family, jury, faculty,* and *committee* are singular when considered as a unit. These will take a verb with an *-s* ending.

Examples: My **family drives** to California each year.

The **faculty recommends** that the new handbook be approved.

If individual members or parts of a group are considered separate, a plural verb without an *s* is needed.

Examples: The dance **team buy** their own costumes.

The **Honor Society compete** in the math competition.

9. When *every* or *many a* comes before a subject, the verb should have an *-s* ending.

Examples: **Every** man, woman and child **remembers** that cold winter.

Many a woman **chooses** motherhood over a career.

10. *There* and *here* are never subjects when they appear at the beginning of a sentence. The subject will come later in the sentence. ***Make certain to identify the correct word as the subject before choosing a verb.***

Examples: There **is** the **jacket** I lost.

Here **are** the library **books** you needed.

Often the subject of a sentence will be delayed. The subject may come after the verb or after a prepositional phrase.

Examples: Through the gate **ran** the champion **horses** of the Kentucky Derby.

In the pond **swim** five large **ducks**.

Subject/Verb Agreement I

Subjects and verbs must agree in number. If the subject is singular (meaning one), the verb must end in **-s**. If the subject is plural (meaning more than one), the verb should not end in **-s**.

Exercise One: In each sentence below, circle the verb that correctly completes each sentence.

1. A black cat (bring, brings) bad luck, according to an old superstition.
2. Young children often (protest, protests) when bedtime (roll, rolls) around.
3. My thoughts often (become, becomes) confused when I sit down to write an essay.
4. When it is hot and humid, my clothes (stick, sticks) to me.
5. A person (need, needs) to set goals if he or she wants to succeed.
6. The damages (were, was) not serious, but the cost of repairs was over a thousand dollars.
7. My head (feel, feels) as if it is about to burst.
8. Joseph (have, has) two sisters, one brother, and several pets.
9. When a tree (fall, falls) in a forest and no one is present, does it make a sound?
10. The food containers (is, are) stacked in the lower cabinet.
11. Mothers (like, likes) to see their children grow into independent adults.
12. My brother (work, works) at the Baptist Hospital as a physical therapist.
13. The little girl (have, has) a beautiful smile, even though her two front teeth (are, is) missing.
14. A kitten (open, opens) its eyes when it is about ten days old.
15. Some boys (pitch, pitches) with one hand and (bat, bats) with another.

In the sentences in Exercise One, the subjects were immediately followed by the verbs. Often, however, you will find that a word or phrase that describes the subject comes between the subject and the verb. These words do not change the subject-verb relationship. To decide whether the verb should add an **-s**, look only at the subject, ignoring any words between the subject and the verb.

- Examples:** 1. Many **readers** of Shakespeare **believe** that *King Lear* is his best play.
2. The **character** who tells the stories in *The Arabian Nights* **is** a woman who is trying to save her life by entertaining the king.

Exercise Two: In each sentence below, circle the verb that agrees with its subject.

1. Marvin's excuses for not having completed his research paper (bore, bores) me.
2. Speeding in restricted zones, especially those near schools, (endanger, endangers) lives.
3. One computer for two or three students (seem, seems) inadequate.
4. The popularity of violent movies (reflect, reflects) the values of our society.
5. Honeydews, one of the favorite melons of consumers, (taste, tastes) clean and sweet.
6. Coaches who are disciplined and who demand discipline from their players usually (have, has) winning teams.
7. The annual sales of video games in the United States probably (exceed, exceeds) a billion dollars.
8. Small amounts of tar and nicotine (damage, damages) the health of smokers.
9. Fiberglass, often used as an insulating material in homes, (cause, causes) allergic reactions in some people.
10. The women riding in the back seat of the car (was, were) not injured in the accident.
11. Animals which sleep in the day and are active at night (have, has) good night vision.
12. The students waiting in line for tickets to the concert (expect, expects) to get good seats.
13. A teenager who tries to conform to the expectations of adults (is, are) often ridiculed by his or her peers.
14. The bark of some trees (have, has) been used for years by herbalists to treat certain diseases.

Subject/ Verb Agreement II: Delayed Subjects

Often, the subject of a sentence will come after the verb. A simple way to identify the subject is as follows:

1. First identify the verb

2. Then ask the question "Who or what...?"

These steps may help you select the subject of most sentences.

Other points to remember:

- The subject is never within a prepositional phrase.
- To find the subject of a question, turn the question into a statement.
- The words *there* and *here* are never the subjects.

In the following sentences, underline the subject once and the verb twice. Check to see if the subject and verb agree. If not, change the verb to agree with the subject.

1. There are many unverified legends about the life of Benjamin Franklin.
2. In the science building hangs the new projector screens.
3. There is almost seven million volumes in the Library of Congress.
4. How much is these bananas?
5. Where are Mary's brothers?
6. There is the socks you bought for soccer practice.
7. There was thousands of people at the parade.
8. In the small pond swims four large fish.
9. There's no one left in the room.
10. In later life comes great wisdom.
11. There is a ninety percent chance of rain in today's forecast.
12. There's three finalists in the speech competition.
13. From the horizon comes an eerie, shimmering light.
14. Near the barn stands two old oak trees.
15. When is Christmas holidays scheduled on the school calendar?

Subject/ Verb Agreement III---Compound Subjects

*When two or more subjects are joined by a conjunction, the result is a compound subject. A compound subject joined by the conjunction **and** is usually plural and therefore requires a verb that does not end in s.*

Examples: The house and the barn belong to Sam's family.

A slice of toast and a glass of juice are on the table.

*When two or more subjects are joined by the conjunction **or** or **nor**, the verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it (usually the second subject).*

Exercise One: In each sentence below, underline the verb that agrees with the subject.

1. Ben and Pete (want, wants) to buy a new computer.
2. The color and style (is, are) important to most teenagers.
3. The price or warranty (is, are) not as important as other factors.
4. Neither a new television nor stereo (interest, interests) Ben and Pete.
5. A large monitor and quality sound (impress, impresses) them.
6. The manager and sales clerk (try, tries) to convince them to buy an expensive model.
7. Neither Ben nor Pete (want, wants) to make a rush decision about the computer.
8. Video editing and computer graphics (provide, provides) new possibilities for the user.
9. Most people know when a computer system or program (work, works) properly, and they can usually do minor repairs themselves.
10. A computer course and a reference guide (is, are) necessary for serious users.
11. A new keyboard or mouse (attract, attracts) those interested in upgrading their systems.
12. The sales clerk or the parents (select, selects) age-appropriate computer games for children.
13. Neither the directions on the package nor the brochure (explain, explains) how to play the game.
14. Both the hard drive and the software installed on our old computer (is, are) damaged.

Exceptions: Though subjects joined by **and** are usually considered plural, there are two exceptions to this rule.

Exception One: *When the two subjects are really naming one person or thing, the subject is singular and the verb should end in s.*

Macaroni and cheese is my favorite food.
The librarian and reading teacher is Mrs. Jones.

Exception Two: *When the word **every** precedes a compound subject, it makes that subject singular, and the verb should end in s.*

Every dog and cat has been vaccinated.

Exercise Two: In each sentence below, underline the verb that agrees with the subject.

1. (Does, Do) every boy and girl in kindergarten visit the museum?
2. Clowns and fools, as well as heroes, (appear, appears) in many of Shakespeare's plays.
3. Either the plaintiff or the defendant (has, have) changed his mind about the suit.
4. Neither the President nor his family members (was, were) safe.
5. Fish and chips (is, are) a specialty of local restaurants.
6. Every dog and cat (is, are) required to wear a tag certifying that it has been vaccinated.
7. The cook and housekeeper (is, are) paid a larger salary than the gardener because of the extra requirements of her job.
8. Rain, snow, or fog (is, are) hazardous to beginning drivers.
9. (Do, Does) dogs and monkeys have the ability to think?
10. Both Jane and her brother (like, likes) riding horses.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Some of the sentences in the following passage have errors in subject-verb agreement. Draw a line through each faulty verb and write the correct form above it.

1 One of the symbols of our nation consist of sticks tied in a bundle. These sticks represent the individual states, and the bundle represent the United States. The symbol, like our flag, makes a statement. The symbol means "United we stand; divided we fall." The symbol and the statement comes from an old story, one of the fables told by an ancient Greek storyteller named Aesop.

2 In this story, a man have several sons who are always quarreling with one another. The father, with frequent admonitions, try to get the sons to stop their arguing and fighting. But nothing works. Finally, the father decide to give his sons a practical lesson in the effects of disunity. He ask them to bring him a bundle of sticks. Handing the bundle to each of his sons, he tells them to break it in two shorter pieces. Each of the sons try to break the bundle, but none of them are able to do so. There is too much strength when the sticks has been tied together. Next the father unties the bundle and hand a single stick to each of his sons and ask each son to break his stick. Of course, all of the sons is able to break the sticks easily.

3 The father then tell his sons, "You are like the sticks. If you are united like the bundle of sticks, you are strong enough to withstand any attacks from enemies. But if there is quarreling and fighting among you, your enemies will be able to defeat you easily." The motto of the United States mean the same thing. The individual states become strong when they are united, but if they try to stand alone, they can be picked off one by one.