

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must “agree” in number (singular or plural) and person. The concept of agreement is particularly relevant to:

- 1) the present simple tense: subjects in 3rd person singular (*he, she, it*) take verbs with the ending -s
- 2) the verb *to be*: it can take forms *am/is/are* and *was/were*
- 3) the verb *to have*: it can take forms *have/has*

Note: If a sentence contains a **modal verb** (e.g. should, can, could, must, may), this modal must be followed by the base form of the verb regardless of the subject’s number and person. For example: *The witness must report to the police* (not *must reports*).

Below are the rules for subject-verb agreement.

- ❖ Make sure the verb agrees with its subject, not with a word that comes between the subject and the verb (whether in preposition phrases or adjective clauses).

For example: The **samples** on the tray in the lab **need** testing. (prepositional phrases)
The **governor**, who declared new policies, **was** applauded. (an adjective clause)

Note: A subject can never be a part of a prepositional phrase (e.g. *in the lab* is a prepositional phrase because it starts with the preposition *in*, so the noun *lab* cannot be a subject of a sentence).

- ❖ Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject comes after the verb.

For example: There **are** surprisingly few **children** in our neighborhood.

- ❖ Treat subjects joined with *and* as plural.

For example: **Matt and Lisa** often **write** in the morning.
Sonja’s **ability and desire** to help **are** inspiring.

However, when the parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person or thing, treat the subject as singular. In addition, when a compound subject is preceded by *each* or *every*, treat the subject as singular.

For example: **Strawberries and cream** **was** a last-minute addition to the menu.
Each tree, shrub, and vine **needs** to be sprayed.

- ❖ With subjects connected by *or* or *nor* (or by *either ... or* or *neither ... nor*), make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

For example: A driver’s license or **credit card** **is** required.

- ❖ Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular. Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things, and include the following: *anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, none, no one, somebody, someone, and something*.

For example: **Everyone** in the class **likes** the teacher.

- ❖ Treat collective nouns, or nouns that refer to a group of individuals (e.g. *family, team, class*), as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

For example: **The class respects** the teacher. (singular)
The classes are debating among themselves. (plural)

- ❖ Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as terms, and gerund phrases are singular.

For example: ***Lost Cities* describes** the discoveries of many ancient civilizations. (title)
“Controlled substances” is a euphemism for illegal drugs. (term)
Encountering busy signals is troublesome to many people. (gerund phrase)

Adapted from: A Writer's Reference (7th ed.) by Diana Hacker.

Last updated 12/21/2017