



Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is when the subject and verb align, meaning the subject and the verb will either both be singular or plural. These parts of the sentence must be consistent; however there are a few exceptions to the subject-verb agreement rule which will be explained in this resource. This resource will help you identify the structure types and assist you in recognizing the subject and verb within a sentence.

Definition

- A **subject** is the main person, place, or thing in a sentence, which acts on an object.
- A **verb** is a word used to describe action or state of being.

Rules

1) Use the **plural** form of the **verb** when a **subject** includes two or more pronouns and is connected with the conjunction “and.”

Example: **He and his employees are** in a meeting.

She and her mom are shopping today.

In both of these examples, the subjects, “he and his employees” and “she and her mom” are made up of a pronoun and a noun connected by “and.” Therefore, the plural form of “to be,” which is “are,” must be used for subject-verb agreement.



2) Use a **singular** form of the verb when two or more singular nouns or pronouns are connected with the conjunction “or” or “nor.”

Example: The **boss or the manager want** to speak with you.

Neither the **woman nor the man want** to buy the sofa.

In both of these examples, the subjects, “boss or the manager” and “woman nor the man” are made up of two singular nouns connected by “or” or “nor.” Therefore, the singular form of the verb “want” is used instead of the plural form, “wants.”

3) The verb must agree with the subject closest to it if the subject has both a singular and plural noun or if the pronoun is connected with the conjunctions “or” or “nor.”

Example: The **girl or her friends are** focused on the assignment.

Neither my **mother nor any of my teachers are** present at the show.

In both of these examples, the subjects “girl or her friends” and “mother nor any of my teachers” include both a singular and a plural noun. Therefore, by looking at the subject closest to the verb, “friends” in the first example will be followed by the plural form of “to be,” which is “are.” Similarly, by looking at the subject closest to the verb in the latter example, “teachers,” the verb used should be the plural form of “to be,” which is “are.”



4) Sometimes many words, or a phrase, will separate the subject from the verb. Keeping this in mind, the verb must still agree with the subject, not any of the other words within the phrase.

Example: The **manager**, who has worked at the company for three years, **is** hardworking.

Payton and Carley, students at the University, **are** soccer players.

In both of these examples, there are phrases which separate the subject from the verb. Therefore, in the first example, “is” is the correct singular form of “to be,” agreeing with the subject “manager.” Similarly, the plural verb “are” agrees with the subject “Payton and Carly” although it is separated by a phrase.

Exceptions

The rules listed above show singular subjects followed by singular verbs and plural subjects followed by plural verbs. However, there are a few exceptions to the previously mentioned rules.

1) Collective nouns, such as team, family, group, collection, pack, etc., are words that involve multiple people or things, yet they are considered singular, and therefore, require a singular verb.

Example: The **softball team** **is** flying to Florida for their tournament.

The **group** **is** working on a project for chemistry class.

In the first example, “team” is a collective noun which is considered to be a singular subject. Therefore, it requires the singular form of “to be.” The same goes for the second example. Although the subject, “group,” refers to multiple people, it is considered a singular noun.

2) When referring to a certain amount of money, use a singular verb; however, if you are trying to explain the overall concept of dollars, use a plural verb.

Example: **Three dollars** **is** not enough to buy a Starbucks coffee.

Dollars **are** a monetary unit used in the U.S. and many other countries.

3) Sometimes a subject will follow a verb. For instance, such is the case in sentences beginning with “there is” or “there are.” The word “there” is not considered the subject of the sentence, so often times, you will have to look past the verb to find it!

Example: There **is** one **bird** that sits on my windowsill.

There **are** many **species** of birds.

4) Words such as “that,” “which,” “who,” and “what” are also not the actual subject of the sentence, meaning the subject will be after the verb which is not normally the case. However, the response to these questions will include the subject first followed by the verb.

Example: Who **is** younger, **Taryn or Monica**?

Answer : **Taryn** **is** younger.





Common Mistakes

- When two singular pronouns are joined by “or,” use the singular verb form.
 - Incorrect:** Austin’s brother or sister plays Xbox games.
 - Correct:** Austin’s brother or sister play Xbox games.
- The subject contains both a singular and a plural subject, which are connected with “or” or “nor.” In this case, remember that the verb must agree with the closest subject.
 - Incorrect:** The actor or the actresses is required to attend the rehearsal.
 - Correct:** The actor or the actresses are required to attend the rehearsal.
- Collective nouns are often mistakenly identified as a plural subject that should be followed by a plural verb. However, these nouns are actually singular and require a singular verb.
 - Incorrect:** The team are walking onto the field.
 - Correct:** The team is walking onto the field.
- When phrases separate the subject from the verb, it can become hard to identify the subject.
 - Incorrect:** The girl, who never misses a practice, get to play the entire game.
 - Correct:** The girl, who never misses a class, gets to play the entire game.

Practice Exercise

Choose the correct form of the verb to agree with the subject. The answers are located at the bottom right-hand corner of the page.

- The prom committee (decide/decides) who the prom king and queen will be.
- One hundred dollars (is/are) enough to buy a lot of Christmas presents.
- There (is/are) many fish in the sea.
- He and his family (plan/plans) on vacationing in the Caribbean Islands.
- My sister, who has trained for Nationals for years, (is/are) a great dancer.
- The girls (like/likes) dressing their American Girl dolls to match their own outfits.
- There (is/ are) a choice you have to make about your future career.

1. decides 2. is 3. are 4. plan 5. is 6. like 7. is

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.

Sources Consulted: Purdue Owl, guidetogrammar.org, “Editing Line by Line”