
SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

The grammatical subjects of sentences must agree with their specific verbs. This means that if the subject is singular, the verb must also be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb must be plural as well.

Examples of Correct Agreement:

When the subject of a sentence only has one noun, it's easy to ensure that the verb agrees. Simply make sure that both the noun and verb are either singular or plural. In the examples below, the subjects have been underlined and the verbs have been italicized.

- The girl *says* that she *does* not want to eat dinner.
- The girls *say* that they *do* not want to eat dinner.

In the examples above, the subjects are “the girl” and “the girls.” Notice that when “girl” is changed to “girls,” the sentence’s verb changes from “says” to “say.” Also, because the sentence has two clauses, it also has two subjects and two verbs. The second subject in both sentences is a pronoun, “she” in the first and “they” in the second. Because “she” is singular, it requires the singular verb “does.” The plural pronoun “they,” in the second example, requires the plural verb “do.”

Compound Subjects:

Sometimes sentences have subjects with two parts. When this happens, the subject is said to be a “compound subject.” Compound subjects have their own rules:

- When a compound subject has two or more nouns or pronouns connected by the word “and,” use a PLURAL verb. For example:
 - The cat and the duck *are* best friends.
- When a compound subject is made up of two or more SINGULAR nouns or pronouns joined together by the words “or” or “nor,” use a SINGULAR verb. For example:
 - Either my comb or her brush *is* in the drawer.
- When a compound subject is composed of both a SINGULAR and a PLURAL noun or pronoun joined by the words “or” or “nor,” the verb should agree with the word that it is closest to. For example:
 - Either my mom or my grandparents *pick* me up from school every day.
 - Either my grandparents or my mom *picks* me up from school every day.

Understanding how to make compound subjects agree with verbs is dependent on understanding the difference between “and” and “or.” The word “and” is used to show that all of the items being discussed should be included; then, because more than one item is being included, the items collectively become

plural. The word “or,” on the other hand, implies that only one of the listed items should be included, which, in turn, makes the chosen item singular.

Collective Nouns:

The term “collective nouns” refers to a single item that is made up of many smaller items. Collective nouns are usually used in reference to groups of people. Some examples of collective nouns include “team,” “family,” “class,” and “committee.” Even though collective nouns are made up of more than one person, they can be singular. When a collective noun is both singular and the subject of a sentence, its verb should also be singular. For example:

- The team *is* doing well.

However, just like any other noun, collective nouns can also be plural. In this case, their verbs should be plural as well. For example:

All of Dixie State’s athletic teams *are* doing well.

Phrases between the Subject and Verb:

Do not be confused by phrases that have been inserted between the subject and verb. Remember that the subject of the sentence is always the noun that is performing the verb. Do not be misled by extra information that has been inserted between the two. For example:

- The coach, as well as all of the players, *was disappointed* by the loss.

Notice that in the sentence above, the subject only includes “the coach.” “As well as all of the players” is extra information and does not form a compound subject. Consequently, the verb—or verbal phrase—“was disappointed” must be singular in order to agree.

Exceptions:

The following words are singular and only agree with singular verbs:

- Each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anyone, anybody, nobody, somebody, someone, and no one.

Additionally, there are some exceptions to standard subject-verb agreement. Below are the most common exceptions:

- Civics, mathematics, dollars, measles, and news all require singular verbs.