

Subject-Verb Agreement

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What is Subject-Verb Agreement?

Subject-verb agreement means that the conjugation of the verb matches the subject (e.g., I, you, they) of the sentence. For example:

- The girl runs to the park is correct, because runs is the correct form of the verb for a third-person singular subject (*girl*).
- However, I eats the cake is incorrect because eats is the form of the verb for a third-person singular subject (*girl*), not a first-person singular subject (*I*).

How to Identify Your Subject

To make sure that all of your subjects and verbs agree, you first need to determine who or what the subject of your sentence is. By definition, a subject is a noun or pronoun (the simple subject) and any words modifying it (the complete subject). An easy way to figure this out is to ask *who* or *what* your sentence is about. For example:

- Jenny likes cats.
 - Who is the sentence about? Jenny.
- Jenny and her friends like cats.
 - However, this sentence is about Jenny *and* her friends.

Questions on Conjugation

Sometimes a lack of subject-verb agreement results simply from confusion about how to conjugate English verbs. If this applies to you, there are many online resources that can help, including conjugator.reverso.net and verbix.com, which conjugate verbs in all tenses.

Conjunctions and Subject-Verb Agreement

Sometimes the subject of a sentence involves conjunctions like *or*, *nor*, or *and*. This type of subject is called a compound subject, and the conjunctions it uses affect the form of the verb.

- (1) When a compound subject has two nouns or pronouns joined by *and*, it is generally the plural form. This is because *and* adds things together.
 - The girl and the boy go to the park.
An exception to this rule occurs when the two nouns or pronouns are joined by *and* but are generally considered to be a unit.
 - Macaroni and cheese is my favorite food. (not are)
- (2) When a compound subject has two singular nouns or pronouns joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb takes the singular form. This is because *or* and *nor* do not add things together, unlike *and*. They suggest a choice.
 - The girl or the boy goes to the park.
 - Neither the teacher nor student was able to solve the equation.
- (3) When a compound subject has both one singular and one plural noun or pronoun joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb is conjugated to match the number of the noun or pronoun closest to the verb.
 - The girls or the boy goes to the park.
 - The boy or the girls go to the park.
 - Neither the teacher nor students were able to solve the equation.
 - Neither the students nor teacher was able to solve the equation.

Modifying Phrases and Subject-Verb Agreement

Additional phrases can interject between the sentence's subject and verb. These phrases may add new information about the subject, but they do not change the subject's plurality. For example:

- The whole family, including their talking dog, sits down to dinner.
 - Even though it includes multiple members and a talking dog, there is still just one family, so the proper verb conjugation is sits.
- One of the parrots talks in its sleep.
 - Even though there are multiple parrots, you are talking about one in particular.

Collective Nouns and Subject-Verb Agreement

Collective nouns are nouns that include more than one person but are classified as singular. These include nouns like family, group, team, crew, and squad. It may help to think of these nouns as singular because they represent a unified group of people rather than individuals. For example:

- Spock and Bones are in Kirk's squad.
 - Here, the subject is two individuals, rather than a group, so the verb does not follow the rules for collective nouns.
- This squad boldly goes where no squad has gone before.
 - Here, the subject is a unified group, so it does follow the rules for collective nouns.

Indefinite pronouns also follow these rules. This set of pronouns includes each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone, and no one. Even though these words may imply that there is more than one person/object involved, they are conjugated as singular nouns.

- Nobody knows the stray dog.
- Everybody loves my brother.
- No one hates puppies.

Exceptions

Nouns that end in *-s* but refer to a single thing (e.g., civics, mathematics, news, or dollars) are conjugated as singular. Many noncount nouns fall into this category (for more information on noncount nouns, see the WSTS handout on the subject). For example:

- Civics is an important subject in school.
- The news likes reporting stories about cute animals.

Dollars has an exception to this rule. If you're talking about a specific amount, then dollars is conjugated as singular, but when referring to dollars themselves, then dollars is plural. For example:

- Sarah has \$1,000, which is a lot of money. (singular: a specific amount)
- To a child, one dollar is a lot of money. (singular: a specific amount)
- U.S. dollars are the official currency of El Salvador. (plural: referring to dollars themselves)

For nouns that have two parts and/or can be referred to as a pair (e.g., scissors have two blades and are referred to as "a pair of scissors"), use the plural verb form. Other words that fall into this category include words like pliers, tweezers, pants, jeans, and shears.

- These jeans are cheap and comfortable.
- Tweezers are sometimes used to pull out splinters.

Works Consulted:

Daily Grammar (dailygrammar.com); Purdue University Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu/owl); University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Center for Writing Studies (cws.illinois.edu); *The Norton Field Guide*, 4th ed. (Bullock, Goggin, and Weinberg); *Writing: A College Handbook*, 4th ed. (Heffernan and Lincoln)