

Subject-verb Agreement

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must always match. This means that they agree in number and person.

Number: how many people or things are doing the activity.

Person: who is doing the activity.

A singular subject requires a singular verb. A plural subject requires a plural verb.

Examples

✓ Hazel McCallion was a famous mayor of Mississauga.

The subject “Hazel McCallion” is singular. The verb “was” is singular. The subject and the verb agree.

✓ Hazel McCallion and Bonnie Crombie are residents of Mississauga.

The subject “Hazel McCallion and Bonnie Crombie” is plural. The verb “are” is plural. The subject and the verb agree.

Making subjects and verbs agree

Ignore all the words between the subject and the verb

Identify the subject and determine whether it is singular or plural. Remove the words between the subject and the verb.

Examples

✗ Paintings such as da Vinci’s Mona Lisa draws thousands of tourists to the Louvre in Paris every year.

Remove the phrase “such as da Vinci’s Mona Lisa.” The remaining subject “Paintings” is plural. However, the remaining verb “draws” is singular, so the subject and the verb do not agree. You can correct it by changing “draws” to the plural form “draw”:

✓ Paintings such as da Vinci’s Mona Lisa draw thousands of tourists to the Louvre in Paris every year.

Here are four other examples of subject-verb agreement:

- ✓ The **student** in my college class **works** long hours.
- ✓ The **student** in my college classes **works** long hours.

- ✓ The **students** in my college class **work** long hours.
- ✓ The **students** in my college classes **work** long hours.

Eight common errors with subject-verb agreement

1. Confusing subjects that look like compound subjects

A compound subject is created when you join two subjects with “and.” These subjects require a plural verb. Some subjects look like compound subjects, but they are not.

- ✗ Batman and Superman **is** two of the most famous superheroes in the world.
- ✓ Batman and Superman **are** two of the most famous superheroes in the world.

Subject: Batman and Superman

Number: Plural (two)

“And” connects the subjects “Batman” and “Superman.” The verb “are” is plural.

- ✓ The officer and his brothers are going to prison.

Subject: The officer and his brothers

Number: Plural (two)

“And” joins the subjects “the officer” and “his brothers.” The verb “are” is plural.

However, some phrases are not the same as “and”:

- together with
- as well as
- along with

These phrases have no effects on the verbs.

- ✓ The officer as well as his brothers is going to prison.

Subject: The officer

Number: Singular (one)

“As well as” does not change the number of the original subject “the officer.”

Therefore, the singular verb “is” should be used to agree with the subject “the officer.”

2. Misidentifying subjects with “each” or “every”

When “each” or “every” comes before two subjects joined by “and,” use the singular verb.

- ✗ Every basketball player and manager admire Kawhi Leonard.
- ✓ Every basketball player and manager admires Kawhi Leonard.

3. Make the verb agree with the closest subject when using either/or and neither/nor

- ✓ Neither the town of Kleinburg nor its hiking trails are far from Mississauga.
The closest subject to the verb is “trails.” This is a plural subject, so “are” is needed.

- ✓ Neither the hiking trails nor the town of Kleinburg is far from Mississauga.
The closest subject to the verb is “the town of Kleinburg.” This is a singular subject, so “is” is needed.

4. Most **indefinite pronouns are singular**, including

- everybody/everything/everyone
- anyone/anything/anyone
- nobody/nothing/no one
- somebody/something/someone

Indefinite pronouns are usually singular, but in some cases they are plural. This will depend on what they are specifically referring to.

- ✗ Everybody recognize the Mona Lisa.
- ✓ Everybody recognizes the Mona Lisa.

In this case, “everybody” is singular.

- ✗ Some of the water are gone.
- ✓ Some of the water is gone.

Water is uncountable, so the singular verb “is” should be used.

- ✗ Some of the cakes is sold.
- ✓ Some of the cakes are sold.

The subject “cakes” is plural, so the plural verb “are” is used.

5. **Collective nouns are usually singular**

Collective nouns include

- team
- group
- class
- band
- committee
- family
- club

- ✗ The Vin Diesel fan club have a Facebook site.
- ✓ The Vin Diesel fan club has a Facebook site.

Usually treat collective nouns as singular as they stress the group as a unit (especially in Canadian English) unless under occasional circumstances the emphasis is placed on the individual members of the group. In that case, the collective nouns are treated as plural.

Singular: The team **likes** the cheer leader.

Plural: The team often **discuss** tough issues.

In the first sentence, “the team” is regarded as a unit, so the singular verb “likes” is used. In the second sentence, the individual members of the team are emphasized, so the plural verb “discuss” is needed.

6. When using “who/which/that,” make the verb agree with the subject that comes before it.

✓ The professor who teaches Shakespeare is well known for his good lectures.
“Who” is referring to “the professor.” This is a singular subject, so the verb must also be singular.

✓ The professors who teach Shakespeare are well known for their good lectures.
“Who” is referring to “the professors.” This is a plural subject, so the verb must also be plural.

7. When word order is inverted, look for the subject first and decide whether it agrees with the verb

- ✓ On the television screen appear an image of the devastation from a hurricane.
- ✓ On the television screen appears an image of the devastation from a hurricane.

“An image” is a singular subject, so a singular verb “appears” is needed.

“There” and “here” are never the subjects in a sentence:

- ✓ There are nine planets in our solar system.

Subject: planets

Verb: are

- ✓ Here is the article I told you about.

Subject: article

Verb: is

However, “it” can be a subject and it is singular.

- ✓ It is time for us to leave.

Subject: it

Verb: is

8. Linking verbs agree with their subjects, not the subject complements

A **linking verb** (*be, feel, look*) links a subject to a new description or identity.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/using-verbs>

A **subject complement** comes after a linking verb and describes or identifies the subject.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/complements/>

Example

✗ The worst part of Tiger Woods' career are the years of injury he suffered.

✓ The worst part of Tiger Woods' career is the years of injury he suffered.

Subject: the worst part

Subject complement: the years of injury

The subject is singular, so the verb also needs to be singular.

Practice Exercises: Choose the best option.

- Neither her sisters nor Kim Kardashian is famous for being talented.
A. is
B. are
- Some of the votes ___ to have been miscounted.
A. seem
B. seems
- Each of Sakura's essays ___ properly cited and referenced.
A. is
B. are
- Leonardo da Vinci's painting, along with his inventions, ___ him unique among his peers.
A. make
B. makes
- At least three-quarters of his books _____ destroyed.
A. were
B. was
- Some of the group members _____ unable to complete their portion of the assignment for Wednesday.
A. is
B. are
- The scientist, as well as his assistants, _____ attending the conference.
A. is
B. are
- The band members ___ ready to go on tour.
A. is
B. are
- 20% of the world's freshwater resources _____ in Canada
A. is located
B. are located
- There _____ approximately 1,800 panda bears remaining in the wild.
A. is
B. are

Answers to practice questions

- | | | |
|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| 1. A. is | 5. A. were | 9. B. are located |
| 2. A. seem | 6. B. are | 10. B. are |
| 3. A. is | 7. A. is | |
| 4. B. makes | 8. B. are | |

More resources for subject-verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement – English Language Learner Writing Centre, Miami University

<https://miamioh.edu/ellwc/resources/grammar-tutorials/sv-agreement/index.html>

Making subjects and verbs agree – Purdue University Online Writing Lab

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/subject_verb_agreement.html

Subject-verb agreement – UofT Writing Advice

<http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/subject-verb-agreement/>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops: <https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.