Subject-Verb Agreement

Sentences are easier to understand when subjects and verbs match, meaning they grammatically agree with each other. This handout will cover subject-verb agreement and some of the special scenarios associated with agreement.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs agree when they are the same in number. A singular subject must have a singular verb, and a plural subject must have a plural verb.

Incorrect: The cat want the milk.  
Corrected Verb: The cat wants the milk.  
Incorrect: The dog like to run.  
Corrected Subject: The dogs like to run.

Special Concerns

Intervening words: Sometimes words (such as modifiers, prepositional phrases, or clauses) separate the subject and verb. If we ignore those intervening words, we can determine if the subject and verb agree.

Example: The woman who sold you the watches is back.

Subjects joined by and: When multiple singular subjects are joined by and, they are considered plural.

Example: The doctor and the nurse are very friendly.

Subjects joined by or and nor: When multiple subjects are joined by or nor, the subject closest to the verb decides if the verb is plural or not.

Example: Neither the nurses nor the doctor knows what to do.

Indefinite pronouns: Pronouns such as everybody, nobody, or anyone are singular.

Example: Nobody knows the extent of the damage.

There is and There are sentences: When sentences begin with these words, the verb reflects the number of whatever the there refers to.

Example: There are dogs.

Relative pronouns: When words such as who, which, or that are the subject of a clause, the verb agrees with the pronoun’s antecedent (the subject that who, which, or that refers to).

Example: The car that was stolen belongs to her.

Words which may be singular or plural: Some words may be singular or plural, depending on usage:

Correct: The deer is here. (The deer in this sentence is an individual animal.)
Correct: The deer are in the forest. (Deer in this sentence refers to a group of animals.)

Verb Tense Consistency

Unless there is a reason for shifting between the past, present, and future tense, verbs should be consistent.

Incorrect: Juliet saw Romeo, then says, “Romeo, Romeo.” (Shift from past to present)
Correct: Juliet sees Romeo, then says, “Romeo, Romeo.” (Both in present)

Note: a shift in tense should only be used when writing about different time periods.

Example: I will perform (future tense) tomorrow, three years after I won (past tense) the medal.