

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* 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.