

Lecture Two: Subject-Verb Agreement **Making Sure Subjects and Verbs Agree**

Mistakes in subject-verb agreement are among the most common writing and speaking errors, and they are particularly irritating to readers. Luckily, mistakes in subject-verb agreement are easy to repair if we keep one simple rule in mind: The subject and the verb in a sentence must agree in number and in person.

Agreement in number means that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. The singular form of all verbs except *be* and *have* is formed by adding *-s* or *-es*: *goes, takes, writes, fishes, brings, drives*. The singular forms of *be* and *have* are *is* and *has*. The singular form of the verb is used when the subject is *he, she, it*, a singular indefinite pronoun (such as *anyone* or *somebody*), or a singular noun. Plural verbs do not have these endings, and they are used when the subject is *I, you, we, they*, or a plural noun.

A singular subject with a singular verb:

E.g. Celia's father makes delicious empanadas.

A plural subject with a plural verb:

Celia's parents maintain their Salvadoran customs.

Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

Errors in subject-verb agreement may occur when :

1. a sentence contains a compound subject;
2. the subject of the sentence is separate from the verb;
3. the subject of the sentence is an indefinite pronoun, such as *anyone* or *everyone*;
4. the subject of the sentence is a collective noun, such as *team* or *organization*;
5. the subject appears after the verb.

Here are three steps to ensure subject-verb agreement. *First*, find the subject of the sentence. *Second*, determine whether the subject is singular or plural. *Third*, select the appropriate singular or plural form of the verb to agree with the subject. The following suggestions will help you with these steps.

1. Remember that a verb must agree with its subject, not with any words that follow the subject but are not part of it. These include terms such as *as well as, including, such as, along*

with, accompanied by, and rather than. If the subject is singular, use a singular verb; if the subject is plural, use a plural verb.

E.g. A tape-recorded confession by the suspects, as well as statements by eyewitnesses, has (not have) been read to the jury.

E.g. Stuffed grape leaves, often accompanied by strong Turkish coffee, are (not is) featured in many Armenian restaurants.

E.g. The ambassadors from the West African countries, accompanied by a translator, intend (not intends) to meet with the president this afternoon.

E.g. The plan for the new convention center, together with proposals for raising tax revenues, is (not are) to be debated by the city council members today.

2. Do not confuse the subject with words that rename it in the sentence.

E.g. The referee's only reward was (not were) taunts and threats.

E.g. Transcripts of the senator's remarks are (not is) the basis of the article.

E.g. Automobile accidents are (not is) the chief cause of death on New Year's Eve.

3. Do not be confused by sentences that are not in the usual subject-verb pattern.

E.g. Where is (not are) the box of paper clips that was on my desk?

E.g. Are (not is) cumulus clouds a sign of rain?

E.g. Under the sofa were (not was) the missing cuff links. **But:** Under the sofa was (not were) the set of missing cuff links.

E.g. There are (not is) many reasons for her success.

E.g. There is (not are) one particular reason for her success.

4. Subjects connected by *and* or by *both . . . and* usually require a plural verb.

E.g. Following the proper diet and getting enough exercise are important for maintaining one's health.

E.g. Both Venus Williams and her sister, Serena, have won coveted tennis titles.

Exception: Use a singular verb when a compound subject refers to the same person or thing.

E.g. Vinegar and oil is my favorite salad dressing.

E.g. The best hunter and fisherman in town is Joe Patterson.

Exception: Use a singular verb when a compound subject is preceded by *each, every, many a, or many an*.

E.g. Each owner and tenant has been given a copy of the new zoning regulations.

E.g. Every cable and pulley receives a monthly inspection.

Exception: Use a plural verb when a compound subject is followed by *each*.

E.g. The tenor and the soprano each wear different costumes in the final act.

5. If the subject consists of two or more words connected by *or*, *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, or *not only . . . but also*, the verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it.

E.g. Either the frost or the aphids have killed my roses. (The plural noun aphids is closer to the verb, and therefore the verb is plural.) This rule presents few problems when both subjects are plural or singular.

E.g. Neither the politicians nor the voters show much interest in this year's election. (Both subjects are plural, and therefore the verb is plural.)

E.g. Not only the car but also the greenhouse was damaged by the tornado. (Both subjects are singular, and therefore the verb is singular.)

Sentences with singular and plural subjects usually sound better with plural verbs.

Notice the difference between the following sentences.

E.g. Neither the players nor the coach doubts they will win the Stanley Cup. (Although technically correct, this sentence would sound less awkward if the subjects were reversed and a plural verb used.)

E.g. Neither the coach nor the players doubt they will win the Stanley Cup. (This version is less awkward and has not sacrificed the meaning of the sentence.)

REMEMBER

1. Adding an -s or -es to a noun makes the noun plural. Adding an -s or -es to a verb makes the verb singular.
2. If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.
3. The verb must agree with its subject, not with any other words in the sentence. Do not be confused by sentences not in the usual subject-verb pattern.

6. Indefinite pronouns that are singular take singular verbs, and indefinite pronouns that are plural take plural verbs. Some pronouns may be either singular or plural in meaning, depending on the noun or pronoun to which they refer. An **indefinite pronoun** is one that does not refer to a specific thing or person.

When used as subjects or as adjectives modifying subjects, the following indefinite pronouns are always singular and take singular verbs.

Singular Indefinite Pronouns			
another	each one	everything	nothing
anybody	either	much	one
anyone	every	neither	somebody
anything	everybody	nobody	something
each	every one	no one	someone

E.g. Everybody is eligible for the drawing tonight.

E.g. Much of the work on the engine has been done.

E.g. Something tells me that I am wrong.

E.g. Each dismissed worker receives two weeks' pay.

When used as subjects or as adjectives modifying subjects, the following indefinite pronouns are always plural and take plural verbs.

Plural Indefinite Pronouns				
Both	several	others	few	many

E.g. Few of the passengers on the tragic cruise of the Titanic are living today.

E.g. Many of the parts in an American car are manufactured in other countries; several come from Japan.

When used as subjects or as adjectives modifying subjects, the following indefinite pronouns may be singular or plural, depending on the nouns or pronouns to which they refer.

Pronouns that May Be Singular or Plural
all any more most none some

E.g. Unfortunately, all of the rumors were true.

E.g. All of the snow has melted.

E.g. Most of the food tastes too spicy for me.

E.g. Most of my freckles have disappeared.

Note: *None* is considered a singular pronoun in formal usage. According to informal usage, however, it may be singular or plural, depending on the noun to which it refers. Note the difference in the following sentences.

E.g. Formal usage: None of the babies has learned to speak yet.

E.g. Informal usage: None of the babies have learned to speak yet.

7. If the subject is *who*, *which*, or *that*, be careful: all of these pronouns can be singular or plural, depending on their antecedents. When one of them is the subject, its verb must agree with its antecedent in number.

E.g. Sergei is one of those musicians who are able to play music at first sight. (Who refers to musicians; several musicians are able to play music at first sight, and Sergei is one of them.)

E.g. Hoang is the only one of the musicians who has forgotten his music. (Who refers to one. Among the musicians, only one, Hoang, has forgotten his music.)

E.g. I ordered one of the word processors that were on sale. (That refers to word processors and therefore takes a plural verb.)

E.g. I also bought a desk that was reduced 40 percent. (That refers to desk and therefore takes a singular verb.)

8. Collective nouns take singular verbs when the group is regarded as a unit, and plural verbs when the individuals of the group are regarded separately. A **collective noun** is a word that is singular in form but refers to a group of people or things. Some common collective nouns are *army*, *assembly*, *committee*, *company*, *couple*, *crowd*, *faculty*, *family*, *flock*, *group*, *herd*, *jury*, *pair*, *squad*, and *team*.

When the group is thought of as acting as one unit, the verb should be singular.

E.g. The faculty is happy that so many students are volunteering for community service.

E.g. The committee has published the list of finalists.

E.g. The couple was married last week.

If the members of the group are thought of as acting separately, the verb should be plural.

E.g. The faculty have been assigned their offices and parking spaces.

E.g. The committee are unable to agree on the finalists.

E.g. The couple constantly argue over their jobs and their children.

9. Some nouns appear plural in form but are usually singular in meaning and therefore require singular verbs. The following nouns are used this way: *athletics, economics, electronics, measles, mathematics, mumps, news, physics, politics, and statistics.*

E.g. Mathematics frightens many students.

E.g. The news from the doctor is encouraging.

E.g. Politics is the art of the possible.

E.g. Electronics is an intriguing field offering relative job security.

When the items they refer to are plural in meaning, these words are plural.

E.g. The economics of your plan sound reasonable.

E.g. My measles are spreading.

E.g. The statistics indicate that little progress has been made.

10. Subjects plural in form that indicate a quantity or number take a singular verb if the subject is considered a unit, but a plural verb if the individual parts of the subject are regarded separately. Such expressions include *one-half of* (and other fractions), *a part of*, *a majority of*, and *a percentage of*.

If a singular noun follows *of* or is implied, use a singular verb.

E.g. Two-thirds of her fortune consists of stock in computer companies.

E.g. Part of our intelligence, according to geneticists, depends on our genes.

E.g. A majority of the herd of sick cattle has to be destroyed.

If a plural noun follows *of* or is implied, use a plural verb.

E.g. Three-fourths of the students in the third grade speak a foreign language.

E.g. A large percentage of the film actors live in either Los Angeles or New York.

E.g. A majority of the lawyers want to make the law exam more difficult.

11. Words that refer to distance, amounts, and measurements require singular verbs when they represent a total amount. When they refer to a number of individual items, they require plural verbs.

E.g. More than six hundred dollars was spent on my dental work.

E.g. Many thousands of dollars were collected for Thanksgiving meals for the poor.

E.g. Two miles is the maximum range of his new rifle.

E.g. The last two miles were paved last week.

E.g. Six months is a long time to wait for an answer to my complaint.

E.g. Six months have passed since we last heard from you.

12. When *the number* is used as the subject, it requires a singular verb. *A number* is always plural.

E.g. The number of students who work part-time is increasing.

E.g. A number of students receive financial support from government loans.

13. Some words taken from foreign languages, especially Greek and Latin, keep their foreign plural forms, but others have acquired English plural forms. As a result, it is not always obvious when to use the singular or the plural form of the verb. For example, “Data *are* available” is preferred to “Data *is* available.” If you are not sure about a word’s plural form, consult your dictionary. Here are some of the more common words from Greek and Latin and their plural forms.

Plural Form of Words from Greek and Latin	
singular	plural
alumna	alumnae
alumnus	alumni
criterion	criteria
crisis	crises
medium	media
memorandum	memoranda
parenthesis	parentheses