Subject-verb agreement simply means that a singular subject needs a singular verb while plural subjects need plural verbs. However, like most aspects of grammar, there are both rules and exceptions. This handout outlines common errors of subject-verb agreement and how to correct them.

Note: Throughout this handout, the subject will be bold and the verb will be underlined.

What is Subject-Verb Agreement?

Subject-verb agreement simply means that the forms of subjects and verbs must match. In other words, singular subjects must have singular verbs, and plural subjects must have plural verbs. It is easiest to determine the appropriate form of a verb when it is close to its subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person and Number of “Run” in the Present Tense</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>I run</td>
<td>We run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>You run</td>
<td>You run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>He/She/It runs</td>
<td>They run</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For more information on the characteristics of verbs as they relate to person and number, please see our “Verbs” handout.

Note: For more information about identifying subjects and verbs in sentences, please see our “Basic Clause Structure” handout.

Why is Subject-Verb Agreement Important?

Often, readers become confused when a subject and a verb do not agree. This is especially problematic in academic writing when you are trying to prove something or trying to explain an already complex issue. Your message can get lost if your sentences are unclear due to subject-verb disagreement.

Singular vs. Plural Subjects

While some instances of subject-verb agreement are obvious, others are trickier.

In order to identify which form of a verb to use in a sentence, the subject must first be identified. Subjects perform the action—or verb—of a sentence and can be nouns, pronouns, or groups of words.
Singular Subjects
If only one subject is performing an action, it is singular.
   Examples: The woman drove her car too fast.
              He tried to eat the entire pizza.

Plural Subjects
If more than one subject is performing an action, it is plural. Most subjects ending in “s” will be plural.
   Examples: David and Marcus ate the entire pizza.
              The executives are on a conference call.

Note: For information on how to make nouns plural, please see our “Plurals” handout.

Collective Nouns and Verb Agreement
Collective nouns are groups of persons, places, or things that function as a single unit. Consequently, these nouns take a singular verb.

Common collective nouns include “family,” “group,” “team,” “crew,” “staff,” “crowd,” etc. In addition, countries and organization names that appear to be plural are treated as collective nouns. These include the Philippines, the Netherlands, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) among others.

Examples: My family likes to ride bikes through the park on weekends.
           The Philippines is where one of my best friends lives.

However, not all collective nouns are singular. When emphasis is placed on the noun as a group of individuals, it functions as a plural noun. Two examples are police and people.

Examples: The police are coming to my house.
           People in the community are upset with the police.

Note: For more information on collective nouns and how to use them, please see our “Nouns” handout.

Pronouns and Verb Agreement
Pronouns stand in the place of nouns and can be both singular and plural depending on the noun that is being replaced. Singular and plural pronouns agree with different forms of verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Pronouns for “Say” in the Present Tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Person</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indefinite Pronouns
Indefinite pronouns do not refer to a specific person, place, or thing.

Common singular indefinite pronouns include “each,” “either,” “every,” “no one,” and “everybody.”
Examples: Each of the teachers needs to attend the meeting.

No one looks like that in real life.

Common plural indefinite pronouns include “several,” “many,” “others,” “few,” “fewer,” and “both.”

Examples: Both of her parents dance professionally.

Few smoke cigarettes on campus.

Pronouns must agree with the nouns they are replacing. For example, if the indefinite pronoun is singular, all other pronouns referring to the indefinite pronoun should also be singular.

Incorrect: Each of the children need to go back to their seat.

Correct: Each of the children needs to go back to his or her seat.

Note: Since the indefinite pronoun “each” is singular, all the other pronouns in this sentence must also be singular.

The same thing is true for plural indefinite pronouns.

Incorrect: Several of the participants gave his or her opinion.

Correct: Several of the participants gave their opinions.

Note: Since the indefinite pronoun “several” is plural, then all the other pronouns in this sentence must also be plural.

Note: For more information on singular and plural pronouns and how to use them, please see our “Pronouns” handout.

Note: For information on common errors when using pronouns, please see our “Pronoun Errors” handout.

Making Subjects & Verbs Agree

With Compound Subjects

When two subjects are joined by “and” or “both...and” the verb is plural.

Incorrect: Penn Station and Union Station is stops on the MARC train.

Correct: Penn Station and Union Station are stops on the MARC train.

However, when two subjects are joined by “or,” “nor,” “either...or,” or “neither...nor” the verb agrees with the part of the compound closest to the verb.

Incorrect: Penn Station or Union Station are where you can stop.

Correct: Penn Station or Union Station is where you can stop.

With Phrases

Avoid confusion that may be caused when a phrase is placed between the subject and verb. The words within the phrase are not a part of the subject. The verb should always agree with the subject of the sentence, not with the noun/pronoun included in the phrase.

Incorrect: The presidential candidate, along with his campaign staff, are extremely nervous about the
upcoming election.

**Correct:** The presidential **candidate**, along with his campaign staff, is extremely nervous about the upcoming election.

**Note:** In this example, the subject is the “candidate”—not the “candidate” and his “staff.” Hence, the singular form is correct.

**Avoid Long Subjects**

Similarly, long, descriptive subjects can also cause confusion. Stay away from using unnecessary nouns and adjectives after the subject, which can make it easy to use the wrong verb(s).

**Incorrect:** The dog with spots and a broken leg whose owner was wearing a blue jacket and green shoes ran away.

**Correct:** The dog with spots and a broken leg ran away. **His owner** was wearing a blue jacket and green shoes.

**Self-Editing Tips**

Reading your work aloud can help you catch errors of subject-verb agreement. Underline a sentence if it does not sound accurate and review these marked sentences at the end of your read-through.

You may also consider having someone else read your work. After working on an assignment for a long period of time, you may become desensitized to your errors. Enlist the assistance of a friend, relative, or classmate.

**Note:** For more information on self-editing strategies, please see our “Proofreading” handout.

**References**


