

Mistakes in Subject-Verb Agreement

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to ensure proper subject-verb agreement in sentences. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Relationship between Subjects and Verbs
2. Special Cases of Subject-Verb Agreement
 - 2a. Irregular Verbs
 - 2b. Compound Subjects
 - 2c. Collective Nouns and Indefinite Pronouns
 - 2d. Separated Subjects and Verbs

1. Relationship between Subjects and Verbs

As you know, subjects and verbs work together in a sentence, and this means that they have to agree with each other to avoid confusing readers. In other words, the tense and number need to be the same for the subject and verb when the sentence is in present tense.

A subject might be singular or plural, so the verb will need to reflect the subject's state.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "The elephants jumps," it just wouldn't make sense for "elephants" (the subject) to be plural unless the verb (to jump) were plural as well. That means it shouldn't have that "s" at the end.

Most of the time, plural nouns that are subjects have an "s" at the end of the word. Some, however, have an irregular form.

➞ **EXAMPLE** "Child" would become "children" when it's plural, not "childs."

Ensuring that you've got the correct number agreement is usually pretty easy, since regular verbs always end in "s" when they're singular, as in "He jumps," "She flies," "He walks." When regular verbs are plural, that "s" is gone, as in "They jump," "Birds fly," "People walk."

Now you can practice identifying this agreement.

➞ EXAMPLE In the sentence "The cats jump for the toy," the words "cats jump" agree and are both plural.

The same rule about agreement is true for which person a sentence is in.

➞ EXAMPLE In the sentence "I run," the subject and verb are both in first person, and in the sentence "The mouse runs," both are in third person.

2. Special Cases of Subject-Verb Agreement

There are several tricky situations where you will need to pay special attention to the agreement between subjects and verbs. We will now look at each of them in detail.

2a. Irregular Verbs

When you have irregular verbs, things get more complicated because an **irregular verb** is a verb that does not follow the standard pattern for verb formation.

To use irregular verbs correctly, you'll have to remember how each one agrees with its subject.

➞ EXAMPLE The verb "to be" doesn't act the same as most other verbs do when plural. The sentence "The mouse is happy" becomes "The mice are happy" when the subject and verb are pluralized.



TERM TO KNOW

Irregular Verb

A verb that does not follow the standard pattern for verb formation.

2b. Compound Subjects

When there are multiple subjects in a sentence, they often act as a compound subject.

➞ EXAMPLE In the sentence "The cats and the mouse share dinner," "cats" is plural and "mouse" is singular. But they're all sharing dinner, so this is a compound subject, and the verb "to share" needs to agree.

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "Marie and John are running away" contains two singular subjects that are joined by "and." This creates a plural compound subject, which is why we use "are" instead of "is."

Keep in mind, though, that not all compound subjects are plural.

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "Either Marie or John are running away" is incorrect because the word that connects the nouns is "or," not "and." When "or" is used, each of the connected nouns is treated as a singular subject (i.e., there's only one subject: either Marie or John). Therefore, the verb should be in singular form: "Either Marie or John is running away."

2c. Collective Nouns and Indefinite Pronouns

Another special situation involves collective nouns, or "group subjects."

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "The family enter the restaurant" is actually incorrect. Even though "the family" no doubt includes more than one member, the collective noun ("family") that is the subject of this sentence is singular. The verb, therefore, should be in singular form: "The family enters the restaurant."

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "One of the teams are cheating" is incorrect. The subject is found in the opening phrase: "One of the teams." The subject of this sentence is "one," which is singular. The sentence should instead read, "One of the teams is cheating."

The sentence above may sound incorrect because of the proximity of "teams" (plural noun) to "is" (singular verb). Remember that "teams" is not the subject of the sentence: The subject of this sentence is "one," which is singular. The verb, therefore, must be in singular form.

The use of indefinite pronouns can also lead to problems in subject-verb agreement.

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "Everyone love Popsicles" is incorrect. The pronoun that is the subject of this sentence ("everyone") may seem to be plural, but it is not. Although it is written as one word, its meaning is "every one"— and "one" is singular. The sentence should instead read, "Everyone loves Popsicles."

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "Many disagrees with me about dinner etiquette" is incorrect because the pronoun that is the subject of this sentence ("many") is plural. The verb form must be plural to match it: "Many disagree with me about dinner etiquette."

2d. Separated Subjects and Verbs

Even if there are words, phrases, or clauses separating the subject and verb, you still need to make sure that the subject and verb agree.

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "The boy, along with his parents, play in the yard" may seem correct at first glance because the subject and verb are separated by the clause "along with his parents." However, the subject ("boy") is singular, so the verb must be written in singular form: "The boy, along with his parents, plays in the yard."

➞ EXAMPLE The sentence "All of the cats in the house hide under the bed" is correct because "cats" (the subject) and "hide" (the verb) are both plural.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **relationship between subjects and verbs** requires that they share the same number and person. As a writer, it's important to watch out for **special cases of subject-verb agreement** involving **irregular verbs**, **compound subjects**, **group subjects and indefinite pronouns**, and **separated subjects and verbs**, as these can make subject-verb agreement more complicated.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Irregular Verb

A verb that does not follow the standard pattern for verb formation.