

Subject-Verb Agreement

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the special relationship between subject and verb. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Identifying Subjects
2. Identifying Verbs
3. Subjects and Verbs in Sentences
4. Subject-Verb Agreement

1. Identifying Subjects

In any correct **sentence** in English, you'll find at least two things: a **subject** and a **verb**. Those elements make up a sentence, which is defined as a group of words that expresses a complete thought and includes a subject and a verb.

A subject is the who or the what the sentence is about—a noun or pronoun, or sometimes a noun clause. In a sentence, this subject is directly connected to the verb, which is a word that defines actions or indicates a state of being.

Some subjects are physical things that a reader might be able to picture concretely.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The **dog** is small.

But some subjects are less concrete, and an abstract concept might very well be the subject of a sentence.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** **Happiness** is an important part of psychological well-being.

Just about anything can end up as the subject of a sentence—car, energy, intelligence.

You can even have a compound subject, which is when more than one noun or pronoun serves as a subject.

The dog and cat are friends.

Here, both the dog and cat are the subjects.

You might even have a sentence where the subject is a singular indefinite pronoun.

Nobody knows how the dog and cat became friends.

Here, nobody is the subject.

You can also have a sentence with plural indefinite pronouns.

Both of them like to nap.

When you have a singular indefinite pronoun as the sentence subject, the verb will also always be in the singular form, such as “knows” in the first sentence above. Likewise, plural indefinite pronouns will have plural verbs, such as “like” in the sentence above.



TERMS TO KNOW

Subject

Who or what the sentence is about.

Verb

A word that defines actions, or indicates a state of being.

Sentence

A group of words that expresses a complete thought, and includes a subject and a verb.

2. Identifying Verbs

When you’re looking for the verb in a sentence, you’ll find that it’s often right after the noun. But this isn’t true all the time, so you’ll have to get familiar with verbs in order to spot them.

You’ve already learned about **action verbs**, or words that describe movement and physical being. You probably know tons of these, such as “run” and “dance.”

But verbs can also be linking words, and those kinds of verbs don’t describe movement in the same way.

Linking verbs connect the subject to information about the subject and do not convey action.

IN CONTEXT

Think about the way these words work as a kind of mathematical equation. In the sentence “The day is hot,” what’s the subject? “The day.” And what’s the verb? “Is,” which means that the day equals hot. The linking verb is like an equal sign equating the subject with an important piece of information about that subject.

*The **day** (subject) = (is) **hot** (verb).*

All of those “be” verbs are linking verbs, but there are others. Words such as “seems” and even “tastes” can be linking verbs.



TERMS TO KNOW

Action Verb

A verb that conveys a physical action typically involving movement.

Linking Verb

A verb that connects the subject to information about the subject, and does not convey action.

3. Subjects and Verbs in Sentences

What about the relationship between these two parts of a sentence? You know that the verb is the word that describes action or a state of being, and you know that the subject is the actor of that verb, or the thing doing the action or existing in the state of being.

Now think about how these actors and actions come together in sentences. There are a few general patterns of sentences that you’re likely to see and use:

- Subject plus verb
- Subject plus verb plus complement
- Subject plus verb plus object

Subjects and Verbs in a Sentence	
Subject + verb	The boy ate.
Subject + verb + complement	The boy is hungry.
Subject + verb + object	The boy ate pancakes.

An **object** is the item acted upon by the subject in the sentence. In these sentences, as in most sentences, the subject comes before the verb. But this isn’t always the way sentences look. Sometimes, the verb comes first:

verb = action; subject = actor

*On the boy's plate **were** (verb) **the pancakes** (subject)*

Also, sometimes the subject or verb will be compound, which means that there will be more than one subject or more than one verb in their own clause together.

***My mom and I** (subject) **are going** (verb) to the store.*

Even if the order isn’t what you expect, remember that a defined subject or subjects always ask who or what is doing the action.

Now you can apply this to some more complicated sentences. See the short paragraph below. In the first sentence, the boy and Susan are both doing the action—eating pancakes. Thus, the first sentence is an example of a compound subject. The more complicated a sentence, the further apart the verb and subject might be, like in the second sentence. There might even be a dependent clause between the subject and verb, like in the third sentence.

The boy and Susan were both excited to eat the pancakes. The pancakes that Susan and the boy ate at the restaurant were delicious. Susan and the boy, when they thought about it later in the day, were glad they had eaten breakfast together.



TERM TO KNOW

Object

The item acted upon by the subject in a sentence.

4. Subject-Verb Agreement

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 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 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.”

Assuring 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.

The cats jump for the toy.

See how 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.

But 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.

You probably already know the most common irregular verbs, such as the singular “is,” “was,” “has,” and “does,” and the plural “are,” “were,” “have,” and “do.”

Here are two sentences with an irregular verb at work:

The mouse is happy.

The mice are happy.

When the number of this sentence changes, the verb “to be” doesn’t act the same as the other verbs do when plural.

In the following sentence, the irregular verb “to have” is in its singular form, but “elephants” is plural.

*The **elephants** has peanuts.*

To fix this error, find the plural form of that irregular verb and swap it in.

*The **elephants** have peanuts.*

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

In the following sentence, the action is focused on hiding, and the cats are doing the hiding.

*All of the **cats** in the house hide under the bed.*

Do the subject and the verb match? “Cats” is plural, and so is “hide,” which means they match.

In the following sentence, “the cats” is plural and “the mouse” is singular.

The cats and the mouse share dinner.

But they’re all sharing dinner, so this is a compound subject, and the verb “to share” needs to agree.

In the following sentence, you’ll note that there is a dependent clause.

*The **cats**, who live in the house together, **enjoy** chasing the mouse.*

Thus the subject and the verb that need to be in agreement will be in the independent clause. Here, you have “cats” and “enjoy.” Do those match? Yes.



TERM TO KNOW

Irregular Verb

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



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned how to **identify subjects and verbs** to see how they work together to form a sentence.

You also worked out this relationship between **subjects and verbs in a sentence**, and practiced **subject-verb agreement** to ensure that the subject and verb share the same number and person so your readers aren't confused.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Sentence

A group of words that expresses a complete thought, and includes a subject and a verb.

Subject

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Verb

A word that defines actions, or indicates a state of being.