

Subjects, Verbs, and Agreement

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the special relationship between subjects and verbs. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Identifying Subjects
2. Identifying Verbs
3. Subjects and Verbs in Sentences
4. Subject-Verb Agreement
 - 4a. Irregular Verbs
 - 4b. Compound Subjects
 - 4c. Collective Nouns and Indefinite Pronouns
 - 4d. Separated Subjects and Verbs

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 who or what the sentence is about—a noun, 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. You can even have a compound subject, which is when more than one noun or pronoun serves as a subject.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "The dog and cat are friends," both the dog and cat are the subjects. You might even have a sentence where the subject is a singular indefinite pronoun.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In the sentence "Nobody knows how the dog and cat became friends," "nobody" is the subject. You can also have a sentence with plural indefinite pronouns.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** *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 second sentence above. Likewise, plural indefinite pronouns will have plural verbs, such as "like" in the third sentence above.



TERMS TO KNOW

Subject

Who or what a sentence is about.

Verb

A word that defines an action or indicates a state of being.

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.



DID YOU KNOW

All of the "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 an 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

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.

⇒ EXAMPLE *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.

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

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

Now you can apply this to some more complicated sentences.

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.

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.



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," and "He walks." When regular verbs are plural, that "s" is gone, as in "They jump," "Birds fly," and "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.

4a. 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 the 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.

4b. 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."

4c. 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."

4d. Separated Subjects and Verbs

Even if there are words, phrases, or clauses separating the subject and verb, you still need to make sure that 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 how to **identify subjects and verbs** in sentences. You also looked at how **subjects and verbs in sentences** work together. This relationship requires **subject-verb agreement** to ensure that the subject and verb share the same number and person so your readers aren't confused. As a writer, it's important to watch out for special cases 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!

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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.

Object

The item acted upon by the subject in a sentence.

Subject

Who or what a sentence is about.

Verb

A word that defines an action or indicates a state of being.