

3. Subject-verb Agreement

When we write in the present tense, the verbs have to agree with their subjects. Notice the difference in the verbs in these two lists:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| I live in the desert. | We live in the deseert. |
| You live in the desert. | |
| He (she, it) lives in the desert. | They live in the desert. |

If the subject of a **present tense** verb is a third-person singular pronoun—*he, she, or it*, (or any noun these pronouns can replace)—**the verb must have an -s ending**. All other noun or pronoun subjects do not have verbs with -s endings.

We make subject-verb agreement errors when we leave out -s endings on present tense verbs with singular third person subjects, or when we add -s endings to present tense verbs with plural subjects (or the subjects I, you, and we).

The irregular verb “to be”

“To be” does not follow the usual pattern for subjects and verbs because it is irregular. This is how you conjugate to be in the present tense:

| | |
|------------------|-----------|
| I am. | We are. |
| You are. | |
| He (she, it) is. | They are. |

This is the conjugation for to be in the past tense:

| | |
|-------------------|------------|
| I was. | We were. |
| You were. | |
| He (she, it) was. | They were. |

Finding Subject-verb Agreement Errors:

To find subject-verb agreement errors, you should know (a) how to identify subject-verb units in sentences and (b) how to identify singular and plural noun subjects.

a. To find subject-verb units, follow these two steps:

1. First, find the verb, by using the time test.

Change the time (or tense) of the sentence to another time:

| | | |
|-------|--|-----------------------------|
| from: | The plant <u>grows</u> well in the desert. | (now) |
| to: | The plant <u>grew</u> well in the desert. | last year, or 20 years ago) |
| OR: | The plant <u>will grow</u> well in the desert. | (next month or next year) |

The verb shows the time or tense in a sentence; since we changed grows to grew or will grow when we changed the time, grows is the verb.

2. Once you have found the verb, it's easy to find the subject.

Ask yourself:

Who or what grows ?
verb

The answer is *plant*, so *plant* is the subject of the verb grows, and we call *plant* grows a subject-verb unit.

3. The second way to find the subject is to look for the first noun in the sentence (the “first noun rule”) and that noun will most often be the subject of the sentence.

b. To decide whether a noun subject is singular or plural, try replacing the noun subject of your sentence with a pronoun.

If the noun subject can be replaced with the 3rd person singular pronoun *he*, *she*, or *it*, the present tense verb must have an *-s* ending:

(*it*)
The plant grows well in the desert.

If the noun subject can be replaced with the 3rd person plural pronoun *they*, or the pronoun *we*, the verb does not have an *-s* ending:

(*They*)
The plants grow well in the desert.

So check for subject-verb agreement in this way:

Example sentence: Charles rides the bus every day.

a. Identify the subject-verb unit by following the two-step process:

1. To find the verb, we change the time or tense of the sentence.

Charles rode the bus every day last year.

We changed *ride* to *rode*, so *ride* is the verb.

2. To find the subject, ask yourself, who or what *rides*, or what is the first noun (person, place or thing) in the sentence)?

The answer is *Charles*, so *Charles* is the subject of the verb *rides*.

b. Replace the noun subject *Charles* with the appropriate pronoun:

[Charles = he] He rides the bus every day.

Since *he/she/it* subjects must have *-s* endings in the present tense, *he rides* is correct, so we can say that the subject and verb agree.

VERY IMPORTANT POINT

Reminder: The plural pronoun *they* refers to **people and things**.

Example: My aunts live next door. *They* often visit my family.

(The pronoun *they* refers to the plural noun *aunts*.)

Example: The trees need watering. *They* also need fertilizer.

(The pronoun *they* refers to the plural noun *trees*.)

Proofreading for Subject-verb Agreement Errors:

1. Read your work out loud; often you can hear an incorrect -s ending, or notice that an -s ending is missing.
2. Follow the two-step process for identifying verbs and subjects, and then look carefully at present tense subject-verb units.
3. Check both the subject and the verb. An error could be in either one.
4. Make sure that plural noun subjects (or the pronouns *I, you, we, and they*) have verbs without -s endings.
5. Make sure that singular subjects (*he/she/it*, or nouns these pronouns can substitute for) have -s ending verbs.

Exercise 1

Column A is a list of subject nouns. First substitute the appropriate pronoun for the subject noun and write it in column B. Then, using the verb in parentheses, make the correct subject-verb combination. **BE CAREFUL NOT TO SHIFT TO THE PAST TENSE. USE PRESENT TENSE.**

| | | | | |
|-----|-------------|-------|--------|-------------|
| Ex. | John | he | (walk) | John walks. |
| | A | B | C | D |
| 1. | girl | _____ | (know) | _____ |
| 2. | children | _____ | (sing) | _____ |
| 3. | tree | _____ | (grow) | _____ |
| 4. | king | _____ | (rule) | _____ |
| 5. | Chris and I | _____ | (talk) | _____ |
| 6. | Sarah | _____ | (live) | _____ |
| 7. | stove | _____ | (heat) | _____ |
| 8. | wheels | _____ | (turn) | _____ |
| 9. | brother | _____ | (play) | _____ |
| 10. | paintings | _____ | (hang) | _____ |

Exercise 2

In each sentence, fill in the bracket above the noun subject with the appropriate pronoun; then fill in the blank with the correct present tense form of the given verb.

Example: [He]

John -drinks, wine with every meal. (DRINK)

1. []
My plant _____ lots of sunlight. (GET)
2. []
Mrs. Johnson _____ on buying the tickets. (INSIST)
3. []
Most Americans _____ television every day. (WATCH)
4. []
My son and I _____ the neighbors who moved. (MISS)
5. []
Bob _____ his job very difficult. (FIND)
6. []
The flowers _____ droopy. (LOOK)
7. []
Sally _____ her two dogs daily. (WALK)
8. []
The newspaper article _____ me. (CONFUSE)
9. []
Mary and I _____ weightlifters. (ADMIRE)
10. []
Mr. Martin _____ novels. (WRITE)

Exercise 3

Fill in the appropriate **present tense form** of the given verb.

- 1) If the subject is singular (can be replaced by *he, she* or *it*), the verb has an *-s* ending.

Example: EAT Joan eats a burrito every day.

- 2) If the subject is plural (can be replaced by *they*) or I or you, the present tense verb has no *-s* ending.

Example: EAT Joan and her boyfriend eat burritos every day.

1. HOPE My sister _____ to become a special education teacher.

2. SAY I always _____ what I think.

3. RUN Every morning, Chris and Peter _____ four miles.

4. ENJOY Most of the time, Juan _____ his work.

5. FRY* Ginger always _____ eggs until they are as hard as rocks.

6. TAKE Medical careers _____ a lot of training.

7. SAY The sign _____ that the store will open at noon.

8. SEE My sister and I usually _____ our parents once a month.

9. SEEM New styles often _____ strange at first.

10. MARRY If she _____ him, will they stop fighting?

* If a verb ends in consonant + *y*, change the *y* to *ie* before adding *s*, e.g. *cry* → *cries*

Exercise 4

The following sentences are all in present tense. Correct any subject-verb agreement errors and remember to use present tense in your corrections. (Not every verb needs changing.) **MAKE CHANGES RIGHT ON THIS SHEET.**

incorrect: My class seem difficult.

This sentence has a subject-verb agreement error because the subject class is singular (can be replaced by it), so the verb should have an *-s* ending.

correct: My class seems difficult.

1. Every year my husband surprise me on my birthday.
2. Jennifer take her children to school every morning at 8:00.
3. I think the movie sound scary.
4. Shirley live in a small town near Chicago.
5. My sisters all loves chocolate ice cream.
6. They risk a fine by driving so fast.
7. The trains goes to St. Louis every day at noon.
8. My personal trainer work at a local college.
9. The weather report looks depressing.
10. He think we should buy a new car.

One Source of Difficulty: Which has the error, the subject or the verb?

Sometimes when we discover a subject-verb agreement error, we immediately assume that the error is in the verb. For instance, in the following sentence:

(incorrect) Many teacher assign a lot of homework

we can see that the subject *teacher* is singular (can be replaced by the pronoun *she* or *he*), and so we try to make the subject and verb agree by adding an *-s* ending to the verb. But the sentence isn't about just *one teacher*, but about *many teachers*. So the subject needs the plural *-s* ending; the verb is correct:

(correct) Many teachers assign a lot of homework.

Exercise 5

The following sentences all contain subject-verb agreement errors. Identify the subject-verb unit in each sentence, and ask yourself if the subject or the verb is incorrect; add an -s ending wherever appropriate. (Note that modifiers like *many*, *all*, *several*, *a few*, and *some* indicate that the count noun should have a plural -s ending.) MAKE CHANGES RIGHT ON THIS SHEET.

incorrect: My classmate all speak more than one language.

correct: My classmates all speak more than one language.

1. One neighborhood cafe serve free coffee before 7 a.m.
2. Many student work on research projects together.
3. Tonight the Elton John concert begin at 8:00.
4. Most teenager grow tired of school in the senior year.
5. In the United States, many mother work full-time.
6. My employer provide health insurance for permanent employees of the company.
7. A local artist paint watercolors of her garden in bright primary colors.
8. Our team's shortstop never get a hit.

A Second Source of Difficulty: Non-Count Noun Subjects

Many nouns in English are non-count; we can't count them by saying two *homeworks*, *three advices*, or four *informations*. No matter how much we are referring to, we never add -s endings to non-count nouns.

When non-count nouns are subjects, they are just like singular subjects; their present tense verbs have -s endings.

Correct Examples:

This week's *homework* seems very difficult (*Homework* can refer to many assignments, or just one.)

Your *advice* helps me a lot. (You may have given me one suggestion or a lot of *advice*.)

The new *equipment* works well. (*Equipment* can refer to one piece of equipment or more than one.)

The *evidence* shows his guilt. (*Evidence* can refer to one piece of evidence or more.)

Exercise 6

In the following sentences, you will look at both the subject and the verb to correct subject-verb agreement errors. All of the sentences have subject-verb agreement errors. **MAKE CHANGES RIGHT ON THIS SHEET.**

Examples:

incorrect: My homeworks take a lot of time.

correct: My **homework takes** a lot of time.

incorrect: Many musician plays more than one instrument.

correct: Many **musicians play** more than one instrument.

incorrect: My oldest sister eat all the time.

correct: My oldest sister **eats** all the time.

1. John play soccer every day after school.
2. The evidences seems valid to me.
3. Some mother takes their children to daycare every day before work.
4. Children's Playgrounds is the oldest playground in the United States.
5. Some midterms is more difficult than final exams.
6. Our Student Union do not provide many places to meet people.
7. My backpack carry all of my books and supplies.
8. The child play with her toys.
9. Most teacher helps you with your assignments.
10. Teenager often longs for freedom.

Another Source of Difficulty: sentences often have more than one subject and verb.

Sentences often have more than one verb:

Example: Stan plays piano and sings in the church choir.

To find the verbs, apply the time test; change the time or tense of the sentence:

(Last year) Stan played piano and sang in the church choir.

To change the time, we had to change *plays* to *played* and *sings* to *sang*. Since verbs are words that change to show time, both *plays* and *sings* are verbs in this sentence.

To find the subject, we ask who *plays* and *sings*? The answer is *Stan*, so *Stan* is the subject of the verbs *plays* and *sings*. And since *Stan* is a noun that can be replaced by the singular pronoun *he*, the singular subject and *-s* ending verbs agree.

Verbs can have more than one subject:

Example: Stan and his brother play piano and sing in the church choir.

If we ask who *plays* and *sings*, the answer is *Stan* and *his brother*, so both *Stan* and *his brother* are subjects of the verbs *play* and *sing*. And since the subjects *Stan* and *brother* can be replaced by the plural pronoun *they*, the verbs don't have *-s* endings.

Many sentences have more than one subject-verb unit:

Example: Stan plays piano, but his sister knows very little about music.

To find the verbs, change the time:

(Last year) Stan played piano, but his sister knew very little about music.

The words we changed are *plays* and *knows*, so both are verbs in the sentence.

To find the subject, ask yourself:

Who *plays piano*? The answer is *Stan*, so *Stan* is the subject of the verb *plays*.

Who *knows little about music*? The answer is *sister*, so *sister* is the subject of the verb *knows*.

So the example sentence has two subject-verb units: *Stan plays* and *sister knows*.

Exercise 7

The following sentences are all in the present tense. Correct any subject-verb agreement errors that you find. Watch for more than one subject and verb in the sentences. **MAKE CHANGES RIGHT ON THIS SHEET.**

Example: incorrect: Juan live in Pacifica and work in San Francisco.

correct: Juan **lives** in **Pacifica** and **works** in San Francisco.

1. The disc-jockey play rock records and announces upcoming concerts.
2. In the morning Gretchen and Paul exercises and in the afternoon she sing while he plays piano.

3. That television announcers speaks with a Texas accent, but his assistant speak with a New York accent.
4. My husbands own a motorcycle, but he prefers to drive his car.
5. My roommate listen to the radio all the time, even when she study.
6. Antiques increases in value every year.
7. My apartments rent for twice as much this year even though the landlord never fix anything.
8. The building need lots of repairs, but my brother and his wife wants to buy it.
9. Bob act stupid when he and his buddies drinks too much.
10. Judy's CD collection impresses all of her guests, but she don't listen to music.

Exercise 8

1. Underline each verb in the following paragraph.
2. Rewrite the paragraph, changing "Andy and Oscar" to "Oscar," and making whatever changes are necessary. **MAKE THE CHANGES RIGHT ON THE TEXT BY CROSSING OUT AND REPLACING THE WORDS ABOVE.**

The first sentence will begin like this: *After leaving Chicago, Oscar now lives on a farm because he wants....*

After leaving Chicago, Andy and Oscar now live on a farm because they want a quiet life in the fresh air. They get up every morning at dawn and before breakfast pick their way through the cow dung, open the smelly chicken coop, and hold their noses as they snatch an egg. While making a fire in their woodburning stove, they choke on the smoke. Then Andy and Oscar drive a deafening tractor out to the field, where, as they fill their lungs with the blowing dust, they sneeze furiously. Until late in the evening, they do chores in the barn. Exhausted, they fall asleep and dream of a sound-proof office and an air-conditioned room.

