

A Guide to Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is the grammatical rule that the verb or verbs in a sentence must match the 'who' and the 'how many' of the subject. For example:

- The sentence is grammatically correct. (it is)
- The sentences are grammatically correct. (They are)

While subject-verb agreement may seem easy in simple sentences like these, it can become tricky in more complex sentences. This guide will explain the most important rules and analyse some common mistakes.

Please note: This guide contains various exemplars. Where a particular exemplar illustrates a grammatical error, it has a cross next to it (X). Where a particular exemplar is correctly written, it is followed by a tick (✓)

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1: Present-Tense Action Verbs with Singular and Plural Subjects

i. The subject

Every complete sentence must contain a subject. The subject is who or what we are writing about. Frequently, our subject is a noun (a word that represents a person, thing, or a physical object):

- The report
- The bone
- The practitioner
- My assignment

ii. The verb

Every complete sentence must also contain a verb.

The verb refers to an action or a state of being in a sentence. Below we have made four present-tense sentences by combining each of our subjects with a verb (underlined). In all cases these are action verbs:

- The report concludes.
- The bone heals.
- The practitioner speaks.
- My assignment examines.

iii. Singular and plural subjects

A subject can be a singular noun (one) or a plural noun (more than one of the same thing):

Singular Subject	Plural Subject
The report	The reports
The bone	The bones
The practitioner	The practitioners
The assignment	The assignments

We can also have a compound subject, consisting of two or more different nouns:

Singular Subject	Compound Subject
The report	The report and the essay
The bone	The bone, the muscle and the skin
The practitioner	The practitioner and the student
The assignment	The assignment and the laptop

In our previous subject verb pairings in section ii, our subjects were all singular, and our verbs all ended with an 's':

- The report concludes.
- The bone heals.
- The practitioner speaks.
- My assignment begins.

However, in the plural-subject sentences below, the 's' has disappeared:

- The reports conclude.
- The bones heal.
- The practitioners speak.
- My assignments begin.

The 's' on the end of the verb is also not present when we have a compound subject:

- The man and the woman speak clearly.
- The students, lecturers and support workers collaborate.
- The medic and the patient wait for the ambulance.

In all these examples, the verb is being modified to match the singular, plural or compound identity of the subject. This is subject-verb agreement in action.

iv. Pronouns

To check whether our writing contains correct subject-verb agreement, it is helpful to understand what pronouns are. Pronouns are short words that can be used to replace nouns in sentences:

- I (first-person singular)
- You (second-person singular or plural)
- He / She / It (third-person singular)
- We (first-person plural)
- They (third-person plural)

We have seen that nouns are commonly used as the grammatical 'subjects' of sentences. Therefore, pronouns can also be used as subjects:

- I study Biology.
- It proves the theory.
- They speak Italian.

We can now establish a rule:

- The only time we add an 's' onto the end of our verb is when we are talking about a singular subject capable of being represented by these pronouns: He / She / It. This is called the third-person-singular (highlighted in grey below):

I conclude
You conclude
He (Pascal) concludes
She (Maryam) concludes
It (my report) concludes
We (my colleagues and I) conclude
They (the studies) conclude

- v. Substituting pronouns to check for correct subject-verb agreement.

Suppose we had the following sentence:

- The research and the outcome proves the hypothesis.

In this example we have a compound subject: 'The research', and 'The hypothesis'. The appropriate pronoun would therefore be 'They' (the third-person plural).

As we know that it is only the third-person-singular form of the verb that requires an 's' at the end of the verb, we now know that our sentence contains an error in subject-verb agreement:

- They proves the hypothesis. X
- They prove the hypothesis. ✓
- The research and the outcome prove the hypothesis. ✓

Let's try it again with a plural subject:

- His ankles swells up during exercise.

In this example, we have a plural subject: 'His ankles'. The correct pronoun to substitute for this would be 'They'. Therefore, we are dealing with the third-person-plural. As we know that it is only the third-person-singular form of the verb that requires an 's' at the end of the verb, we now know that our sentence contains an error in subject-verb agreement:

- They swells up during exercise. X
- They swell up during exercise. ✓
- His ankles swell up during exercise. ✓

vi. Different verb endings

There are some verbs that, in the third-person singular form, do not just acquire an extra 's'.

For verbs ending in 'ss', 'sh', 'ch' or 'x', we must add 'es' when using the third-person singular in the present tense.

- They miss the deadline.
- He misses the deadline.
- I finish my research.
- He finishes his research.
- You teach the class.
- She teaches the class.
- I index my content.
- She indexes her content.

There are some verbs which end in the letter 'o'. We must also add 'es' to these when using the third-person singular:

- I undergo therapy.
- She undergoes therapy.

There are also some tricky verbs that end in the letter 'y' followed by a consonant. We must also add 'es' to these, but only after changing the 'y' to 'i':

- I rely on my sources.
- She relies on her sources.

2: 'To be' / 'to have' with singular, plural and compound subjects

i. Recap

So far, we have only looked at action verbs:

- The report concludes.
- The bone heals.
- The practitioner speaks.
- My assignment examines.

However, we must also deal with the verb 'to be' and the verb 'to have', both of which can be used as an auxiliary (helping) verb, and as a main verb.

We will look at the verb 'to be' first. This can create issues in both the present and the past tense.

ii. The verb 'to be'

The table below sets out the various ways the verb 'to be' is modified:

Grammatical person	Present Tense	Past Tense
First-person singular	I am	I was
Second-person singular or plural	You are	You were
Third-person singular	He is, She is, It is	He was, She was, It was
First-person plural	We are	We were
Third-person plural	They are	They were

iii. 'To be' as a main verb and as an auxiliary verb

It should be noted that that 'to be' can appear as a main verb in a sentence:

- I am a student.
- His is early for his lecture.

It can also appear as an auxiliary (helping) verb preceding a main verb:

- I am going to work.
- She was given her instructions.

In both cases, we observe the usual subject-verb agreement with the underlined verbs.

iv. The verb 'to have'

With the verb 'to have', the verb form only changes in the present tense:

Grammatical person	Present Tense
First-person singular	I have
Second-person singular or plural	You have
Third-person singular	He has, She has, It has
First-person plural	We have
Third-person plural	They have

- v. 'To have' as a main verb and as an auxiliary verb

Once again, the verb 'to have' can appear as the main verb in a sentence:

- I have a theory.
- He has a lecture.

It can also appear as an auxiliary (helping) verb preceding a main verb:

- They have proposed a theory.
- He has attended a lecture.

In both cases again, we observe the usual subject-verb agreement.

- vi. Substituting pronouns to check for correct subject-verb agreement with the verbs 'to be' and 'to have'

Suppose we had the following sentence:

- The chart and the graph was displaying incorrect information.

We discover this is not correct by checking the pronouns:

- They was displaying incorrect information. X
- They were displaying incorrect information. ✓
- The chart and the graph were displaying incorrect information. ✓

Let's try it again with the verb 'to have':

- The statistics has defied expectations.

Again, we discover this is not correct by checking the pronouns:

- They has defied expectations. X
- They have defied expectations. ✓
- The statistics have defied expectations. ✓

3: Concrete, Countable, Abstract and Uncountable Nouns

Recap

We have seen that every complete sentence must contain a subject and a verb. The subject is who or what we are writing about. The verb may tell us what the subject is doing, or something about their being or appearance:

- The study was pioneering.
- The library is open.
- The book contains many chapters.
- The lecturer addresses the students.

The subjects of these phrases are concrete nouns. They are also countable. The following section will provide more information.

i. Concrete and countable nouns

Concrete nouns have a tangible, physical reality capable of being experienced by some combination of the five senses – sight, scent, taste, touch or hearing. Many concrete nouns are also countable nouns, i.e. we can have either one or more than one of them. When we have a plural or compound subject involving countable nouns, the usual subject-verb agreement rules apply to the verb:

- Both studies were pioneering. (they were)
- The libraries and the shops are open. (they are)
- The books and the journals contain many chapters. (they contain)
- The lecturers address the students. (they address)

ii. Uncountable concrete nouns

Most concrete nouns are countable, but a smaller number are not. We do not think of them as being either 'one' or 'more than one':

- I love a music. X
- I have a thousand moneys. X
- The cat licked all the creams. X
- I want to buy some furnitures. X

iii. Use the third-person singular for uncountable concrete nouns

Although grammatically we do not think of the above nouns as either singular or plural, we do refer to each of them as 'it', and use the appropriate subject-verb agreement for the third-person singular.

Subject (noun)	Expressed as a pronoun	Verb phrase (verb is underlined)
music	it	<u>is</u> beautiful.
money	it	<u>has</u> no intrinsic value.
cream	it	<u>contains</u> fat.
furniture	it	<u>increases</u> in value

However, if we have a compound subject consisting of two or more uncountable nouns, we use the plural form of the verb:

- Music and money are beautiful things. (they are)

iv. Abstract nouns

Abstract nouns refer to concepts or ideas that cannot be detected (in their entirety) by the five senses. The list of nouns below are all abstract.

- war
- information
- patience
- courage
- chaos
- freedom

Getting subject-verb agreement right with abstract nouns is challenging, as some of them take countable and uncountable forms depending on whether we are referring to specific or general instances of them. In the list above, only 'war', 'disturbance' and 'freedom' can appear as both countable and uncountable abstract nouns:

- Wars cost money. (they cost)
- War costs money (it costs)
- The disturbances spread from town to town. (they spread)
- The disturbance spreads from town to town (it spreads)
- Freedoms have been hard won (they have been)
- Freedom has been hard won (it has been)

The other words in our list are uncountable and so cannot appear in plural form. For guidance on how to use correct subject-verb agreement with countable and uncountable abstract nouns, please see the next section.

v. Subject-verb agreement with uncountable abstract Nouns

If an abstract noun is not countable, and therefore has no singular or plural form, we should nevertheless treat it in the same way we would treat a singular noun, and use the third-person-singular:

- Longevity is desirable. (it is)
- Patience costs nothing. (it costs)
- Courage leads to positive outcomes. (it leads)

vi. Subject-verb agreement with countable abstract Nouns

If an abstract noun does have a singular and a plural form, and we wish to use it to refer to one or more specific examples of the noun, we treat it in the same way we would treat any singular or plural noun and use the appropriate single or plural form of the verb.

- Wars have become more frequent. (they have)
- A disturbance upsets sensitive people. (it upsets)
- Freedoms are worth fighting for. (they are)

4: Gerund Verbs and Gerund Verb Phrases

i. Verbs that behave as nouns

So far, every sentence we have looked at has had a noun or nouns as its subject. We have also seen how these nouns can be substituted for pronouns, to help us check if our subject-verb agreement is correct:

- The analysis proceeds.
- It proceeds.

However, we may also need to write sentences where the subject is not a noun or a noun phrase:

- Reading is a useful and pleasurable activity.

In the example above, 'reading' is the subject of our sentence. 'Reading' is an example of a gerund verb (a verb that behaves like a noun). Here are some further examples of gerund verb phrases as the subject of sentences:

- Proceeding with caution is advised.
- Studying grammar improves our language skills.
- Evaluating evidence was central to my thesis.

Each of these phrases, if used as the subject of a sentence, could be substituted for the pronoun 'It':

- Proceeding with caution reduces the chance of mistakes.
- It reduces the chance of mistakes.

- Studying grammar enhances our understanding of language.
- It enhances our understanding of language.

- Evaluating evidence is a core scientific skill.
- It is a core skill.

There may be a phrase in which two or more gerund verbs each refer to the same grammatical object (the thing the verb is happening to):

- Researching and writing my assignment ('my assignment' is the object)
- Discussing and debating the topic ('the topic' is the object)

In such cases, even though there are two verbs, we would treat each phrase as a single subject:

- Researching and writing my assignment is challenging. (it is challenging) ✓
- Discussing and debating the topic helps clarify terms. (it helps) ✓

However, we may have two distinct gerund verb phrases that each refer to a different grammatical object:

- Analysing the data and evaluating the evidence (our objects are 'the data' and 'the evidence')

Because our gerund verb phrase refers to two activities applied to two different objects, this constitutes a compound subject and would require the third-person-plural form of the verb:

- Analysing the data and evaluating the evidence involve a lot of work. (they involve). ✓

5: Further Guidance on Subject-Verb Agreement

Enrol on the English Support Pages on Blackboard	The English Support section of Blackboard contains resources to help you with all aspects of grammar. If you have activated your university account, you can click on the English Language Support tile via the Student Hub.
Do some analytical reading specifically to develop your awareness of subject-verb agreement.	One of the best ways to master subject-verb agreement is to encounter and study examples of it in its natural setting—in books, journals and online articles. Set some time aside to study passages of English academic writing, and observe how writers modify and adapt their verb forms according to whether they are using single, plural or compound subjects.
Proof-read	Check and proof-read your work, and try to make sure you are using correct subject-verb agreement.