



# Center for Writing and Speaking

## S NO. 5 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject of a sentence and its verb must always agree in number (one, two) and person (first, second, third). A lack of agreement can drastically change the meaning of your sentence. Keeping your subjects and verbs in agreement can be as easy as identifying your subject wherever it is located, or as tricky as remembering a few rules.

#### The importance of being in agreement:

*Kissing monkeys are entertaining. vs. Kissing monkeys is entertaining.*

The only difference is in the verb, but the meaning of each sentence is very different.

#### Finding the subject of your sentence.

Ask: Who or what is performing the action? What noun/clause/subject is essential to the basic meaning of the sentence? Is it singular or plural? Is it first, second, or third person?

*Example: Dogs eat cats.* Who or what carries out the action of the verb “eat?” Dogs!

“Dogs” is the subject.

#### Checking the verb for agreement in number and person.

Now determine how the verb should be shaped to match the subject. Don’t be fooled by words that come between the subject and verb, such as appositives, prepositions, clauses and other phrases.

*Example: She and I go to the park every Sunday.* “She and I” is the subject. There’s more than one person going, and one of those is the speaker, so the subject is first person plural.

*Example: The secretary, together with the treasurer, demands a revote.* Since the subject is secretary, the verb should be singular third-person= (she) demands. The treasurer is only an aside, not a subject.

*Example: Under the table are twenty balloons.* The subject is “balloons,” so the verb must be plural, even though the nearest word, which can be mistaken for the subject, is singular — “table.”

#### Verbs and subjects to watch out for:

- Antecedents: “One of the” and “who, which, that” are a deadly combination. The verb form often will depend on the meaning of the sentence, and who “who/which/that” really refers to.
  - *Example: Carla is one of the employees who always work overtime.*  
Meaning: There are many employees who work overtime. Carla is one of them. Who is doing the action in this phrase? The employees. That is who “who” is referring to. That is why the verb should be plural third person — “work” and NOT “works.”
  - *Example: Sam is the only one of the employees who always works overtime.*  
Meaning: There are many employees. Only Sam works overtime. Who is doing the action? In this meaning, Sam is. This “who” is referring to him. He is the one working overtime. That is why the verb should be singular third person — “works” and NOT “work.”

(continued on reverse)

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### Subject Verb Agreement, Continued

- **Linking Verbs:** They should agree with the subject, not the complement.  
*Example: Katie's joy is fudge bars.* "Joy" is the subject and "bars" is the complement. Why? Mostly because of the order of the sentence. Linking verbs are unique in this way, because they do not represent an action. Look at what happens if the order of the nouns is reversed.  
*Example: Fudge bars are Katie's joy.* Now, the subject is "bars" and the complement is "joy."
- **Hidden plurals:** Some words are disguised plurals; others are masquerading singulars.
  - *Example: Politics is despicable. (NOT: Politics are despicable.)*

#### Grammar rules to watch out for:

- **Compound subjects:** Sometimes, the number of the subject is hard to determine.
  - *Example: My mom and my dog like to play Frisbee.* Two separate subjects = plural subject.
  - *Example: My pet and best friend is my dog.* Two subjects, actually the same person or thing = single subject.
  - *Example: Each elephant gets a ton of peanuts a day.* "Each" and "every" indicate a single verb form.
  - *Example: Neither the parakeet nor the mice know what happened. OR Neither the mice nor the parakeet knows what happened.* With "neither...nor," "either...or," and just "or," the verb agrees with the closest subject.
- **Collective nouns:** Some nouns include a group of people (like the word "group"). These subjects can be singular or plural depending on meaning. Are you talking about the group as a unit (singular) or as individuals (plural)? When in doubt, choose singular.
  - *Example: The faculty decides on courses for the next year.* The faculty act as one.
  - *Example: The faculty disagree on which courses to offer next year.* The faculty are acting as individuals.
- **Indefinite-pronoun subjects:**
  - These subjects ("somebody," "another," "any," "either," etc.) are usually singular.
    - *Example: Nobody knows the rate of pizza consumption.*
  - "Both," "few," "many," "others" and "several" are plural.
    - *Example: Few of the teachers know the rate of pizza consumption.*
  - "All," "any," "enough," "more," "most," "none," "part," and "some" can be either, depending on the reference:
    - *Example: Some of the students know the rate of pizza consumption.* Many students = plural verb.
    - *Example: Some of the pizza was consumed.* One hunk o' pizza = singular verb.
  - Gerund phrases, titles of works, company names, and words as words: These groups are all singular.
    - *Example: Walking to the store in this heat is tragic, but The Grapes of Wrath is more tragic.*

As you can see, the meaning of the sentence is the primary guide. Taking out everything that is not essential to the sentence and moving clauses around can help clarify who is doing what. Finally, don't rely on computer grammar checks. Only you really know what your subject is.

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